

AMIMESIS AND THE SIGNATURE: GRAMMATOLOGICAL OPENINGS
IN THE SCARLET LETTER AND MOBY-DICK

By

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By

Arthur Samuel Kimball

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my friend, John Leavey, for his incomparable guidance and abiding friendship, and to my wife, Pam, in acknowledgment of her many sacrifices and in gratitude for her love, faith, and the wonder of her humor.

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This dissertation demonstrates how The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick resist the classical reading project Derrida has identified. I call the ground of this resistance amimesis. Both The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick set up blocks to the various mimetic attempts to determine their meaning in mimetic terms; they refuse the mimetic gesture that would subordinate them to an outside-text. This refusal is particularly evident in the way both texts stage what Derrida calls general signature. Amimesis and signature, then, provide the means for understanding the grammatological openings of The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick.

Part I addresses the problem of mimesis in terms of truth. The Scarlet Letter, I argue, disrupts the possibility of truth and thus of mimesis. The disruption occurs in its textual maxim--"Be true. . . . Show freely . . . some trait . . .'"--but also in the three scaffold scenes. The scenes indicate that truth cannot be shown freely but is lost in every attempt at establishing it. The result is truth-as-

undecidable, truth-as-trait. The maxim articulates the textual law of The Scarlet Letter. Derrida's notion of the "remark" helps elucidate how this law of the trait functions as the difference of truth, and how this law can be read a-mimetically.

Through the trait, The Scarlet Letter sets its textual signature against the classical signature and forecloses on the movement of reference outside the text.

Part II extends the amimesis of truth to the amimesis of the I in Moby-Dick. Ishmael attempts to narrate a number of "strange" scenes that invariably hark back to a family scene, a scene of "uncanny" violence in the form of homelessness through abandonment and especially infanticide. The novel generalizes homelessness as the threat to selfhood that constitutes selfhood.

However, the limit of self is not the limit of narration nor of the narrating I. The I of Moby-Dick does not refer to an entity on the model of an ego. It mimes such an entity by miming the (fort/da) gestures a mimetically conceived self performs in order to assure the identity it loses in seeking its assurance. The I here plays out the possibilities of an amimetic "identity," of an I in difference.

INTRODUCTION

In the following passage from Of Grammatology, Derrida offers a challenge.

[T]he philosophical text, although it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches. Reading should be aware of this project, even if, in the last analysis, it intends to expose this project's failure. The entire history of texts, and within it the history of literary forms in the West, should be studied from this point of view. With the exception of a thrust or a point of resistance which has only been very lately recognized as such, literary writing has, almost always and almost everywhere, according to some fashions and across very diverse ages, lent itself to this transcendent reading, in that search for the signified which we here put in question, not to annul it but to understand it within a system to which such a reading is blind.
(160)

In the Western tradition, Derrida says, the project of the philosophical text has governed what all but an exceptional kind of writing has intended to say or do: to "teach" and "transport" a "signified content" that would be outside the text, that is, to teach and transport what is sought after as a revelation of truth, the transcendental signified. In addition to characterizing the philosophical text, this project defines literary writing as well, for such writing, too, has "almost always and almost everywhere . . . lent itself to this transcendent reading." Thus, Derrida's challenge: to be aware of how this project operates, to

understand the transcendent reading in relation to a system "to which such reading is blind."

Derrida's challenge, the challenge of deconstruction, names a course of study: the history of texts in general and the history of literary forms in the West in particular. This dissertation takes up Derrida's challenge with respect to two textual moments in this history, that is, with respect to The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick. Canonical works, The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick would seem to offer relatively strong points of entry into the tradition whose "search for the signified" Derrida "put[s] into question."

It would not be difficult to indicate the affinity between American literature and the philosophical project Derrida names as the project of the West. Indeed, a certain tradition of criticism within the field of American studies has sought the identity of American literature as American and as literature precisely in its philosophical orientation. Two brief examples.

The "constant" in Roger Asselineau's equation for an American literature is a philosophical one, as the title of his book, The Transcendentalist Constant in American Literature, indicates. In the preface to this work, Asselineau asserts that "most American writers are avowed or crypto-romantics, crypto-transcendentalists . . ." (v), foremost among them Walt Whitman and his long line of American progeny. What was Whitman's poetic achievement and where was his poetic power but in giving life to a certain philosophical attitude? "But it was Whitman," Asselineau writes, rather than the "founding father" of transcendentalism, "who entered the Promised Land of transcendentalist poetry which Emerson was allowed to see only from afar. [Whitman] succeeded

better than Emerson in transmuting the disincarnate concepts of transcendentalism into poems of flesh and blood . . ." (vi). In the beginning was the philosophical word, and for Asselineau its poetic incarnation in Whitman's texts and the texts of his "spiritual heirs" (vi) constitutes the literary tradition of America. But it is a problematic tradition in terms of literary specificity, since it is a tradition founded or begotten not in the name of literature, if there can even be such an originative name, but of philosophy. If Whitman succeeds where Emerson did not, the success of the father of transcendentalism is nevertheless insured: transcendentalism animates the heirs' poetry and that of the heirs of the heirs whose poetry continually reanimates the father's inaugural if disincarnate system and enables it to live--to live on after its originator and to live on in another kind of discourse upon which the philosophical in effect has rebegotten itself.

In A World Elsewhere, Richard Poirier repeats the classical gesture that subordinates literature to some form of philosophical project. Thus, he invokes philosophy through the name of Hegel in order to define America and American literature as the adventure of consciousness, as consciousness's creation of its freedom:

Let us for the moment assume with Hegel that "freedom" is a creation not of political institutions but of consciousness, that freedom is that reality which consciousness creates for itself. The assumption makes it more understandable that the creation of America out of a continental vastness is to some degree synonymous in the imagination with the creation of freedom, of an open space made free, once savagery has been dislodged, for some unexampled expansion of human consciousness. (4)

Such self-expansion would close the circuit of consciousness upon itself: consciousness would create a freedom that makes possible the enlargement, the continued extension, the unexampled expansion of

consciousness. In creating its freedom as its reality, consciousness creates the reality of freedom and hence the reality of consciousness: consciousness creates consciousness, the creative predication merging with the creating subject in a spectacle of supreme self-origination.

There are significant problems with Poirier's perspective, especially the way it represses while naming a fundamental violence that precedes the adventure of consciousness, to which I will return in my conclusion. In the meantime, Poirier's book, first published in 1966 by Oxford University Press and republished in 1985 by Wisconsin University Press, articulates what remains the overriding focus of nineteenth-century American studies, namely the nature and history of consciousness as embodied in American literature, particularly the canonized works of the American Renaissance, but in the non-canonical literature of the century as well. Although recent studies of the period vary widely in their methods and aims, they share a preoccupation with the problem of consciousness as it is able to be reflected in the different works they examine. Consider the following three studies, each published in 1987: Robert Shulman's Social Criticism and Nineteenth Century American Fiction, Jeffrey Steele's The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance, and Leon Chai's The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance. In each case, their criticism proceeds on the basis of a presupposition, never addressed as such but rather taken for granted, that the texts in question refer to an outside-text. The question for them is not whether or how texts refer but rather how the reference can best be specified in ways that will illuminate the place and role of consciousness in the relation of fiction and world.

Shulman specifies the outside-text in political-psychological terms as the arena of consciousness: "One of my central concerns has been to illuminate the political psychology of capitalism as it emerges in the works and lives of our great nineteenth-century writers" (317). For Shulman, the concept of political psychology "centers on the impact capitalism had on the depths of consciousness of creators and their creations" (317). Nineteenth-century American literature, then, records the history of its "divided selves," particularly in terms of how "the large-scale production and distribution of commodities" produced "a reified or commodified consciousness" (317).

Although Shulman indicates that unfreedom is without question a consequence of market and political forces, nevertheless he appeals to the individual person as a free moral agent in order to assure this person's freedom from political and social hegemony. In this, his reading of American literature accords with Poirier's view that consciousness produces its freedom. Shulman's tone, however, is much more resigned to the labor that will be involved. Here is the last line of his book: "In our own work we can affirm our freedom as responsible producers of the works we work on."

For Steele, the outside-text is also a question of consciousness. Thus, nineteenth-century American literature rhetorically stages one or another version of the mind's development. Each of the works Steele considers

defines a renewed being predicated upon the recovery and expression of divine powers found within the self. Instead of focusing upon each writer's theory of the mind, I attend to how that vision of psychology functions rhetorically. Motivating their readers to identify with the personae posited in their texts, Thoreau, Whitman, and Fuller provide ontological paradigms that attempt to reconstitute

their readers' existence. If Emerson reconstitutes the self by promoting faith in the unconscious, Thoreau and Whitman elaborate that model of self-reliance by attending to the ways in which the release of conscious power refashions the individual's sensuous involvement with the world. Margaret Fuller, on the other hand, reveals the ways in which Emerson's model of the self depends upon a masculine conception of spirit. Her contribution to psychological mythmaking during the American Renaissance is a feminized model of psychic energy and its expression. (12-13)

These alternative visions of mind constitute "the spectacle of self-representation during the American Renaissance" as either a process of rhetorical regeneration or as a process of rhetorical demystification (185). These two processes "are not antagonists," Steele avers, "but rather are hermeneutically paired," by which he seems to mean that they are dialectically related in an on-going historical unfolding of "the psyche as we know it" (185).

For Chai, too, consciousness is the central focus of his study of the American Renaissance. "If there is a single theme common to the four chapters on secularization of religion, the historical consciousness, pantheism, and subjectivity and objectivity"--the two-hundred page center of his study--"it must be that of consciousness" (2). As part of his exposition, Chai traces the history of Romanticism along an essentially Hegelian trajectory. Romanticism, he says, was able to "establish the significance of consciousness for the content, as well as the form, of thought" (2) in a way that enables thought and world to be dialectically related:

For Romanticism . . . the identification of subjective and objective signifies the possibility not only of apprehension, the connection or relation of things, but of creation, the formation of the external world through the formation of thought and consciousness. Here, thought does not simply create the external world within itself. Instead, the

process of the formation of thought is also that of the world, and there is no realm of thought separate from that of the simultaneous formation of both. This redefinition of the nature of thought makes possible the relation of Romanticism to itself. Such self-relation, which had not been possible to earlier periods as part of their proper thought content, is now brought to objective form in Hegel's doctrine of Essence as the self-reflection of Being.
(2)

In Chai's literary history of the American Renaissance, once again the forms of literature are assimilated to the philosophical project Derrida has identified, the project of "transcendent reading." Thus, in Chai's reading, literary Romanticism will epitomize the work of reflective consciousness (3).

It is in relation to such readings that this dissertation takes up the challenge of Derrida's deconstruction. In accepting the challenge, I propose to demonstrate how The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick can be read as providing "points of resistance" to the classical reading project that Derrida and others have recognized. I call the ground of this resistance amimesis. Both The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick resist the classical reading project in its mimetic forms. In general terms, both texts put up blocks to any reading that would attempt to determine their meaning in terms of mimetic categories; they refuse the mimetic gesture that would subordinate them to an outside-text. This refusal is particularly evident in the way both texts stage what Derrida calls general signature. The notions of amimesis and signature, then, provide the means for understanding grammatical or deconstructive openings
1
in The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick. Let me explain by reviewing the organization of this dissertation.

Part I addresses the problem of mimesis in terms of truth. In the "Double Session" of Dissemination, Derrida has forcefully demonstrated

the essential link between mimesis and the process of truth that has always governed "the history of [mimesis's] interpretation" (1981, 193). The Scarlet Letter, I argue, absolutely disrupts the possibility of truth, and thus it disrupts the possibility of mimesis. This disruption, however, produces a "grammatological opening" through which the text can be read amimetically. The a- designates both the privative--the negation of mimesis within mimesis--and the scarlet letter. Thus, amimesis is the nonmimesis produced by the A, the scarlet letter which is both an object and theme within the romance and the romance itself, The Scarlet Letter. The amimesis of the A effects a peculiar disruption of truth and the system of mimetic reference traditionally established in the name of truth.

In the first chapter, "The Mimetic Tradition and The Scarlet Letter," I begin by reviewing the theme of truth in the romance as a preliminary step to understanding why critics have so determinably focused on this aspect of the text. The Scarlet Letter, of course, thematizes truth; every character in the text invokes the truth and attempts to speak in its name. In this regard, the characters perform the same (philosophical) gesture that has characterized by far and away the majority of contemporary readings of the romance.

In order to establish the underlying presuppositions of these readings, I then define the classical reading model as it is expounded by Alfred North Whitehead, Richard E. Palmer, and Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur, in particular, identifies two major forms of interpretation, classically conceived: interpretation as restoration of meaning and interpretation as suspicion. Both hermeneutical orientations, however, remain bound to a certain notion of truth. Under the umbrella-category

of truth, the classical reading position is able to encompass a rather astonishing range of divergent, even contradictory, readings.

Finally, in the last part of the first chapter I examine in some detail the interpretive moves of a number of classical criticisms of The Scarlet Letter from the 1950s to the present in order to demonstrate the persistence of the classical mimetic approach to the romance. This review thus serves as a propaedeutic to the subsequent chapters by identifying what is at stake for practical criticism in Derrida's challenge.

Having established the possibilities of mimetic interpretation for The Scarlet Letter, I then, in the second chapter, examine the blocks to mimeticism that the text sets up, particularly in its moral--"'Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred'"--but also in each of the three scaffold scenes. These scenes indicate that truth cannot be shown freely. Every attempt at showing freely the worst fails. The text interdicts its moral. Thus, in the third scaffold scene the moment of revelation is a moment of nonrevelation; in the first scaffold scene the law that would uphold the showing of truth collapses as it is erected; and in the second scaffold scene the light of revelation is a light that darkens the possibility of the revelation of truth. The three scaffold scenes indicate the loss of truth in every attempt at determining truth. The result is not truth-as-ambiguous, however, but truth-as-undecidable, truth-as-trait. The moral articulates the relation of truth and trait as the textual law of The Scarlet Letter. Derrida's notion of the "remark" helps explain how the features of this textual law function and the way the trait marks or remarks the "difference" of truth.

In the rest of the chapter I examine truth as the remarked remarking trait in relation to the general signature that forecloses on the movement of reference outside the text. The signature, classically understood, refers the signed text to its signer and thus promises to anchor the text in a reference to a presumed authorial outside. Derrida shows, however, that the signature must always fail in this attempted reference, that there is a kind of general signature of the text at work that prevents the text from being signed "outside" of itself. Derrida's demonstration helps clarify the shortcomings of three post-structuralist readings of The Scarlet Letter that attempt to return the text to its author, to recuperate the text in relation to its supposed origin in what they take to be the autobiographical introduction of Hawthorne's "The Custom-House."

Derrida's understanding of the general signature also helps clarify the relation of The Scarlet Letter's textual signature(s) to what Ralph Flores calls the ungrounding allegory of the romance. The general signature of the text specifies the general law that governs the romance's particular literary form.

Finally, the notion of general signature describes the romance's rewriting of its borders, its supposed mimetic edges. The Scarlet Letter places "truth" within its textual play; it inscribes the Puritan legal code within the law of its contradictory textuality; and it reworks its scenes of "revelation." This rewriting extends to the romance's imagistic and thematic attempts to frame itself. The result is yet another (amimetic) blocking of truth and of the referential movement beyond the reworked borders of the text.

In sum, the second chapter traces the various textual ways The Scarlet Letter prevents a referential criticism while opening the way for amimetic reading.

With respect to Moby-Dick, Part II repeats in abbreviated form the general organization of Part I. Having established the pervasiveness of the mimetic approach to The Scarlet Letter, I forego repeating that effort. Like The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick has been read in a predominantly mimetic fashion.

The argument of Part II is to extend the amimesis of truth to the amimesis of I. I ask, in Part I, what happens when the basis of mimesis, truth, is thematized in a text in a way that withdraws truth in its presentation. In Part II, I ask what happens when the mimetic perspective is applied to a narrating voice that attempts to represent the limits of narrative representation in relation to the limits of life. The Scarlet Letter challenges the thematics of mimesis. Moby-Dick challenges mimesis not in terms of a theme within narration but of the narration itself. Both The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick stage their respective disruption of mimesis in terms of signature.

In the third chapter, "Uncanny Narration in Moby-Dick," I explore how Ishmael, as mimetic character, attempts to narrate what he repeatedly marks as "strange." Freud determines the strange or uncanny by a German word, unheimlich, that means the unhomely or homelessness, and further determines this homelessness as a species of the canny, the homely. What takes place at home, of course, in the psychic economy Freud sketches is an oedipal drama. Thus, for Freud the uncanny signifies the return of a repression associated with oedipal violence. In Moby-Dick, the uncanny--the strange--is similarly determined as a family

scene but is extended to include pre-oedipal violence as well, the violence of abandonment and infanticide. At the same time, the uncanny is generalized so that homelessness is rewritten as the threat to selfhood that constitutes selfhood. In mimetic terms, the novel reproduces in its narration an image of a certain limit condition of the narrating self that threatens to destroy it.

But this limit is not the limit of narration. In telling of the limit, the narrating I, Ishmael, does not honor the limit but exceeds it. When I/Ishmael attempts a mimesis of homelessness, the resulting narrative falls short of or is in excess of a mimetic tale. This is the problem I take up in the fourth chapter, "'And I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee': The Fort/Da Axis of Identity in Moby-Dick." There I argue that the textuality of the I prevents it from referring to an entity on the model of an ego or self. The I of Moby-Dick mimes such a self by miming the gestures such a self performs in order to assure itself of an identity it repeatedly loses in representing the threat of loss of self. The terms of the miming are akin to the fort/da game Freud describes in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In miming the game, the I of Moby-Dick plays out the possibilities of an amimetic "identity," of an I in difference.

Such an amimetic I disrupts the codes that are typically invoked to read the I and its narration referentially. Like the narrating voice of The Scarlet Letter, the I of Moby-Dick works otherwise. Neither simply singular nor plural, neither simply dead nor alive, neither an identity nor a loss of identity, the narrating I of Moby-Dick escapes the reference to identity that the mimetic reading would attempt to establish for it.

This dissertation concludes with a very brief remark about the preamble to the United States Constitution, where the founding of the nation is announced in the form of a signature event, and an analysis of Poirier's attempt to designate and sign the beginnings of American literature. The consequences of such signature events are inscribed within a general textuality that unsettles the foundation of the purported foundational event.

NOTES

1

The phrase, "grammatological opening," is Derrida's. In the first interview in Positions, Derrida notes that "the last five texts [in Writing and Difference], beginning with 'Freud and the Scene of Writing,' are engaged in the grammatological opening" (4). In Derrida's texts, this "opening" is effected by such notions as "differance," "trace," "supplement," "paleonymics," and so on, including, of course, "signature."

PART I

AMIMESIS AND TRUTH:

A "GRAMMATOLOGICAL OPENING" IN THE SCARLET LETTER

"[T]he semantic horizon that historically governs the notion of communication is exceeded or split by the intervention of writing, that is, by a dissemination irreducible to polysemy. Writing is read; it is not the site, "in the last instance," of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth."

--Derrida (1977, 195)

"Suppose that what is more properly scaffolded here is still the form of an A. . . ."

--Derrida (1986, 123b)

". . . a letter does not always arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting."

--Derrida (1987, 489)

"What results is a cipher without truth, or at least a system of ciphers that is not dominated by truth value. . . ."

--Derrida, (1973, 149)

CHAPTER 1
THE MIMETIC TRADITION AND THE SCARLET LETTER

Overview of the Argument

Two observations by Jacques Derrida in the "Double Session" of his Dissemination, where he inspects the notion of mimesis especially as Plato develops it in the dialogue of the Philebus, will orient the following discussion of Hawthorne's first romance. First, according to Derrida, "the whole history of the interpretation of the arts and letters has moved and been transformed within the diverse logical possibilities opened up by the concept mimesis" (187). One does not have to have read the "Double Session" to agree with this assessment of the intellectual tradition of the west. Such a classical work of scholarship as Auerbach's Mimesis, to take one notable and representative example, sketches the history of occidental literature in terms of two "basic types" or "styles" of realism (23); the two modes constitute a kind of mimetic matrix that governs, as Auerbach's subtitle indicates, "the representation of reality in western literature." This cultural agenda has a determinate relation to the question of truth. As Derrida notes, and this is the second observation I wish to emphasize, "mimesis, all through the history of its interpretation, is always commanded by the process of truth . . ." (193). Whether mimesis has been understood in one or the other of its classical philosophical conceptions--as an unveiling or revealing or presentation of the thing itself, on the one hand, and as adequation, on the other--it has been "commanded" by

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truth. "In each case, mimesis has to follow the process of truth. The presence of the present is its norm, its order, its law. It is in the name of truth, its only reference--reference itself--that mimesis is judged, proscribed or prescribed . . ." (Derrida, 1981, 193). Truth has always governed what has gone under the name of mimesis; it is the law of mimesis.

This governance, this relation of truth and authority and law, is particularly important for an understanding of what happens in The Scarlet Letter. If we retain Derrida's term and write of "the command of truth," the ambiguity of the genitive (the of) is such that truth can be what commands or what is commanded; it can be what inscribes and marshals the force of law or what is inscribed within law and its system of authority. Within The Scarlet Letter, of course, various characters repeatedly attempt to command the truth, and the novel itself labors to give voice to truth's command, most notably in the moral imperative, cited by the narrator or narrating voice near the end of the text: "Be true! Be true! Be true! . . ." ² The Scarlet Letter here voices what has the appearance of the command of truth, but the novel also, as I will show, "remarks" it in a signature of its signature--these two Derridean terms, remark and signature, will have to be explained--and in remarking it interrupts the command, reorganizes its syntax, and restates it nonmimetically. The remarked command of truth in turn extends its remarking back over the text to reorganize it--or to indicate how the text has all along been reorganized or been reorganizing itself--according to a nonmimetic "logic" or "economy." That is to say, I shall be arguing that the textuality of Hawthorne's text reworks the articulation of the command of truth, and hence reworks the mimeticism

of the entire text, and does so in what may be called an anti-, an ana-, or an a-mimetic way. Anti-, ana-, or a-: the three prefixes indicate a movement oppositional to or askew of mimesis, a resistance to mimesis within mimesis, and even something on the order of the nonmimesis of mimesis. The a- of amimesis, of course, in addition to being a privative, plays off the scarlet letter and thus raises the possibility that the mimesis of the A is bound up with an amimesis. Amimesis or anamimesis, then, will be the names for what, to play off the first citation from Dissemination, opens up various logical impossibilities, various logical contradictions--but impossible or contradictory, that is, with respect to the concept of mimesis but not exactly so with respect to the notion of amimesis--within which this paper will attempt to read The Scarlet Letter.

Let me restate my aims. In more general terms, amimesis will be the name for the textual effects produced by and also brought about at certain "narrative borderlines," or for the effects of certain borderline narrative devices. These amimetic borderlines and borderline mechanisms--the image of the scarlet letter is one of them, and so too are the images of the gravestone, the "threshold," and so on, as are various non-imagistic devices such as the Custom House "introductory"--if read in a certain way rather remarkably undermine what has been taken to be the romance's mimetic aspects, including the meaning of its aforementioned moral, the meaning of its meaning, as it were. These borderlines and borderline devices bring about or constitute certain contradictions, or what would be called contradictions from the standpoint of the mimetic reading, but what must be reconsidered from the standpoint of what I am attempting to describe as an amimetic or anamimetic

reading. In point of fact, The Scarlet Letter does not so much fall into its narrative "contradictions" as exploit their curious logic; in some sense the novel performs and hence "issues" from them. As the rhetorical and psychological conditions of the narrative, the "contradictions" are a form of self-troping or self-encrypting (in the double sense of the term as self-encoding and self-interring) by which the text undergoes a kind of mourning and is able to "end" with an image of laying to rest--the death of Hester Prynne, or in any case the headstone that marks her grave, but also in some sense the death of the narrative that writes itself as its own epitaph and in so doing regenerates the aforementioned "contradictions."

The textual effects of the novel, then, involve the questions of death, memory, and endings, but also the question of beginnings. The primal scene of beginning--the unrepresented scene of Pearl's conception--sets in motion all the problems and difficulties of what I would call its complementary and equivalent scene, the primal scene of ending. The narrative situation might be summed up in this way: in The Scarlet Letter, these primal scenes of conception and death and their problems are refracted through a logic of contradiction whose rule or possibility is that a certain kind of A can be equal to non-A. This amimesis, then, interrupts the command that would place life and death and the representation of life and death under the governance, purview, and logic of the presence of the present, namely, truth.

To put the matter in one other way, the scarlet letter--as the red A; as the tombstone inscription; as Pearl; as the sign for adultery that also doubles as the sign for able and all the other meanings ascribed to the A by characters in the novel, and thus that doubles as the sign for

signs in general; as the law; as the novel itself; in short, as all that comes to be inscribed by the A, including the whole order of appearances and reality, and, finally, the necessity but impossibility of interpretation--simulates the order of mimesis; and in this simulation the order of mimesis comes to be dissimulated. Hence the overdetermined neologism, amimesis, for the textual possibilities or effects, the curious textual turns and play, if you will, of a scarlet letter, of The Scarlet Letter, that no longer takes on the form of truth's ontotheological signification and no longer serves its transcendental mythology.

Truth as Governing Theme in "The Scarlet Letter"

"Truth" is a key word throughout the entirety of Hawthorne's tales and romances, so much so that this critical commonplace scarcely needs emphasizing. Nevertheless, a review of the way this term appears in The Scarlet Letter will help elucidate its received status as a master term and its referent a master concept, and thus its received authority over what I will call the numerous and various traditional or classical readings of this novel. These readings tend to take truth, with all its Hawthornian difficulties and elusiveness, nevertheless to be the teleological category of interpretation. The novel, in this view, intends to instruct, and the function of criticism is to make explicit the intention and the instruction and their relation to the truth that is taken to ground them. In this regard, traditional readings of The Scarlet Letter typically have repeated the terms of the didacticism--the constellation of notions concerning truth as the teleological ground of being--that the novel thematizes. In other words, the traditional readings repeat one--but it is only one, and, as I shall argue, more radically self-subverting or self-deconstituting, even deconstructing,

than typically has been noted--of The Scarlet Letter's own attempted self-readings. However, before examining some individual traditional readings, and before scrutinizing the problem of truth's deconstitution, I first would like to note the persistence, the sheer repetition, the power of the concern with truth, for this term and its concept establish a system of reference, a reading machine, so to speak, that no character, including the narrating voice, is able to dispense with. Each takes on the concern for the truth that has become the consequent focus of so much of the critical work on this text.

From the beginning to the end, truth would seem to be the moral, legal, psychological, and narrative centerpost of The Scarlet Letter. The narrative insists on this word, underlines it, recalls it, places it at the forefront of attention, and refracts it through an array of metaphors.

Near the end of the novel the narrator or narrating voice presents the famous dictum, cited above: "'Be true! Be true! Be true!'" This admonishment serves to summarize the apparent moral content of the text for the voice that has narrated the story, and to stand as a kind of epigraph to it: "Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence . . ." (SL, 183). Then follows the triple admonition--within quotation marks in the text, perhaps as if to cite not a person but moral experience itself, the "voice of experience," so to speak, and perhaps as if to emphasize its universal applicability. A command among other of its grammatical possibilities, this moral regulates the narrator's reading of the events that comprise the story; the moral thus rules the novel and may even be read as the novel's rule, the command of the text

itself delivered through its delegate, the narrating voice. In any case, the command of truth disciplines the narrating voice who gives voice to what is now the authorized moral, namely the command of truth that enables the narrative voice to predicate its one moral, the one moral, to begin with. Truth authorizes and commands itself through the agency of the narrator who, in voicing the command, in predicating it as the story's moral, thus comes to command the command of truth that commands its delegate. In sum, the dictum, "Be true!" constitutes a thematic content (the moral, whether understood as the narrator's or as the text's), and it constitutes the governing form of that content (the process of self-predication by which the moral, the command of truth, authorizes its narrative agent to predicate its own authorization in the form of the command of truth).

I want to return at a later point to consider how this textual circuit functions as a signature event in which the text would sign itself. And also to how it functions as a primal scene in which the text would beget itself. With respect to both functions, the coherence of the textual circuit is amimetically broken up. In the meantime, even before the narrator puts it into a sentence, the moral governs the actions, feelings, and moral aspirations of all the characters, each of whom desires the truth as the good, as the justification for his or her life. Each character would command the truth and proffer it as the guarantee of his or her discourse, indeed, of his or her very life and soul. In other words, each character would speak in the name of truth and sign with its seal.

Near the beginning of the romance, when Hester Prynne has been led from prison and taken to the public scaffold to stand before the law,

the narrator underscores the basis of the law's authority in terms evocative of the truth of truth. Nothing less than the very force of the sacred is vested in the persons of the magistrates; the legality of their decisions comes from the truth of the spiritual mission itself. Thus, the double force of the law as the authority of truth and the truth of authority is manifested in the "solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town" who preside over Hester Prynne's sentencing (SL, 46). The governor, the narrator says, as well as "the other eminent characters, by whom the chief ruler was surrounded, were distinguished by a dignity of mien, belonging to a period when the forms of authority were felt to possess the sacredness of divine institutions" (SL, 51). In other words, the Puritan law codifies truth as the very basis of its legality; that legality enables the magistrates to administer the law in the name of truth. The circulation of truth through the circuit of legality is assured by the presumption of the law's truth. The Puritan law upholds the Puritan truth that upholds the law. Which means the law would uphold itself, produce itself as the truth, just as in this circularity the truth produces itself as law. Because truth encompasses both the law and its mitigation, the magistrates, in the name of their true faith, in the name of truth, are both God-fearing and merciful. They live out but two of truth's possible modes.

The truth of truth in all of its possible manifestations, however, encompasses more than the law; or, rather, truth as the law encompasses a range of sumptuary and moral disciplines which it is the task of the civic and religious authorities to administer and of education to incul-

cate. At stake is nothing less than the fate of the individual's soul, as the Governor makes clear when he addresses Hester Prynne:

"The point hath been weightily discussed, whether we, that are of authority and influence, do well discharge our consciences by trusting an immortal soul, such as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world. Speak, thou, the child's own mother! Were it not, thinkest thou, for thy little one's temporal and eternal welfare, that she be taken out of thy charge, and clad soberly, and disciplined strictly, and instructed in the truths of heaven and earth? What canst thou do for the child, in this kind?" (SL, 82)

As an instrumentality of the truth, the law must watch over the entire process of education and intervene in it to insure its aims. Hester Prynne accepts this law and its theological source. "'God gave me the child,'" she cries, appealing to the magistrates in the name of the absolute authority and the absolute truth they claim to represent in their own elected persons.

"She is my happiness!--she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!" (SL, 84)

As Hester Prynne's punishment, Pearl insures the efficacy of the law and marks the law as a force of life. The law has access to Hester Prynne's affective being through her daughter. Indeed, Hester Prynne seems to be arguing that Pearl is the incarnation of the law. Thus, when Arthur Dimmesdale addresses Governor Bellingham on Hester Prynne's behalf, he can second her right to keep her child, and he can do so by invoking the truth of what she has spoken, the apodictic truth of her nature as the child's mother.

"There is truth in what she says," began the minister, with a voice sweet, tremulous, but powerful,

insomuch that the hall reechoed, and the hollow armor rang with it.--"Truth in what Hester says, and in the feeling which inspires her! God gave her the child, and gave her, too, an instinctive knowledge of its nature and requirements,--both seemingly so peculiar--which no other mortal being can possess. And, moreover, is there not a quality of awful sacredness in the relations between this mother and this child?" (SL, 84-85)

Between the words of Hester Prynne's address to the Governor and her instinctive knowledge, there is for Dimmesdale no discrepancy, no gap, only truth. She instinctively knows the truth, Dimmesdale says, and may she feel it too.

"She recognizes, believe me, the solemn miracle which God hath wrought, in the existence of that child. And may she feel, too--what, methinks is the very truth,--that this boon was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother's soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her!" (SL, 85)

It takes the words of "a professional teacher of the truth" (SL, 112), as Dimmesdale is later characterized, to convince the church authorities to leave Pearl in the keeping of her mother, a person whose entire subjectivity, whose entire life, Dimmesdale validates in the name of the same truth upon which Hester Prynne has based her plea. (The content of Dimmesdale's appeal repeats that of Hester's.) Of course, the scarlet letter itself is the seal and brand of the truth into which Hester Prynne has been so painfully disciplined: "I,--whom the scarlet letter has disciplined to truth, though it be the truth of red-hot iron, entering into the soul . . ." (SL, 125).

The relation of truth to education is simultaneously a relation to all the possible forms of edification--punishment, chastisement, mortification, shame, guilt, even death by execution. In years prior to the time of Hester Prynne, adultery might have met with capital punishment,

and at least one among the congregation of onlookers at Prynne's public debasement advocates her death: "'This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly there is, both in scripture and the statute book'" (SL, 42). Such a form of punishment, however extreme, would find its support in both scriptural and civic law, two adjuncts of the truth.

However, other forms of punishment, too, find their support in the relation of truth to the psychosocio-dynamism of shame and guilt. Thus, as Hester Prynne suffers the excoriating gaze of others, so does Arthur Dimmesdale suffer the self-loathing gaze of his own eyes turned inward to record his own evil, to record the truth of his flagitious heart. To his congregation, he confesses his self-detestation but without acknowledging any specific wrongdoing. According to the narrating voice,

He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable evil They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. . . . The minister well knew--subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!--the light in which his vague confession would be viewed. . . . He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood. And yet, by the constitution of his nature, he loved the truth, and loathed the lie, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all things else, he loathed his miserable self! (SL, 105-106)

This loathing that defines Dimmesdale in his self-image constitutes both the attempt to live up to the truth and the refusal of the truth. However one comes to understand this psychology, for the narrating voice truth is the reference for the minister's affective life. For the narrating voice, Dimmesdale is divided within himself. He speaks the truth but contextualizes it in such a way that he falsifies it. Again, one could suggest an array of reasons for Dimmesdale's verbal behavior,

a complex of motivations for his public declamations on the necessity of owning up to one's sinfulness, on the one hand, and his refusal or inability to own up to the particulars of his own misery and fault, on the other. However, when such explanations assume a certain determined view of human character, a certain notion of motivation grounded in the truth of analytic (or psychoanalytic) categories, then these explanations repeat the narrator's and Dimmesdale's faith in the category of truth and the complementary categorical imperative to know oneself. For the narrating voice, as for Dimmesdale, the category of truth remains operative; its capacity to be perverted does not cast doubt on its essential nature but on the nature of the one who, out of whatever complexity of human weakness and failing, cannot live up to the command of truth.

Truth is the narrator's frame of reference for Chillingworth's affective life as well as for Hester Prynne's and Arthur Dimmesdale's. The magistrates, as legal representatives of the community, assume as their authority the truth that nevertheless in principle belongs to each person individually as each person's obligation, as each person's seal of individual identity as well as of membership in the community. Like the magistrates, but without their election to civic and spiritual authority, Chillingworth too invokes the truth, the truth he would possess and control, as the guarantee of his vocation. "'Who is he?'" Who is the man who "'has wronged us both,'" he demands of his former wife (SL, 58). She refuses to say, and thereupon he reaffirms a purpose he has a bit earlier formulated in words that are a complex foreshadowing of the moral imperative at the end. The father of Pearl, the lover of Hester Prynne, the one who has thereby wronged Chillingworth, will be

made known: "'But he will be known!--he will be known!--he will be known'" (SL, 50). Now, to Prynne herself, he says: "'I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine'" (SL, 58). For Chillingworth, the truth means disclosure, especially the revelation of secrets. The temptation, nearly irresistible here, is to read Chillingworth's invocation of truth as an ironic, and for the Puritans a blasphemous, cover for his diabolical desire to possess the man who has possessed the woman he himself, Chillingworth, has been unable to. In this reading, truth would be the name for perverted desire.

However, although one may want to distinguish between Chillingworth (whose truth is the destructive attempt to enslave another) and the magistrates (whose truth is a prescriptive socio-moral code), both accept violence--violence in the forms of legal punishment and violence in the forms of psychological suffering--as part of truth's necessity. The Puritan community has licensed itself, through their representatives, the Church Fathers, to punish in the name of truth. The magistrates have the right, indeed the obligation, to bring wrongdoers into public view and to chastise, shame, humiliate, debase, expose, and otherwise judge them and impose upon them the conditions of punishment. From what does their right derive? The Scarlet Letter does not say anything on this matter other than that the magistrates speak in the name of truth. Chillingworth claims a similar right, and he squarely aligns himself with the law in seeking to know Hester Prynne's "partner in iniquity." Chillingworth acts within the possibilities of both the

magistrates' law and the magistrates' truth to assimilate the law and the truth to his vengeance and his vengeance to the law and the truth. Once again, if Chillingworth perverts the truth, his perversion does not challenge the narrator's faith in truth as the epistemological ground of the narration nor as the ontological ground of the lives of the characters; rather, Chillingworth's perversion of truth argues his incapacity, the incapacity of one particular mortal being, to maintain a full relation to truth and the life it would impart.

The narrating voice will eventually judge Chillingworth's desire
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for revenge an evil desire, but this voice will leave intact the structure of knowledge Chillingworth uses to effect his desire. That is, the narrating voice does not condemn Chillingworth for what he knows and discovers about Dimmesdale but for misusing his knowledge in the service of an "evil principle," namely revenge. Chillingworth's emotional constitution, according to the narrator, corrupts his extraordinary intellect, twists it, turns it astray. But his fundamental impulse to know and to reveal is the narrator's as well. To a great extent, in fact, the narrating voice exposes Dimmesdale's hypocrisy, his lies, his false presentation of himself to his congregation through the narrative agency of Chillingworth's project. Indeed, Chillingworth's project defines the dramatic structure of the storyline from which the narrating voice finally extracts the moral axiom, "be true."

According to the traditional readings, Chillingworth's project is, of course, ironic in that it is predicated on a form of the concealment of identity with respect to himself that he desires to overcome with respect to Prynne's lover. Thus, Chillingworth aspires to a knowledge, a revelation of identity, an unveiling of the truth about another that

he must disallow of himself. In this he doubles for Dimmesdale, the target of his project, whose own ministerial project repeats and doubles the predication of Chillingworth's: Dimmesdale demands of others what he is unable not to hide within himself, the truth of his sin, the truth of his untruth.

The reciprocal ironies of the two projects remain bound to the teleological governance of truth, the notion that grounds the traditional reading positions from which any and all of the novel's purported ironic discrepancies can be determined. Within The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, like the narrator, appeal to truth, address themselves to truth, as the reference for measuring the ironic complications of their lives--those manifold intricacies of desire that seem to run counter to truth but in fact serve truth and its power to reveal. The scene of Hester Prynne's avowal of Chillingworth's identity--but perhaps the avowal should be called her violation of her promise to him, her betrayal, not confession, of the truth of his name and past relation to herself--illustrates how tenaciously the characters hold to the notion of truth as the guarantee of being. Immediately prior to Hester Prynne's revelation, Arthur Dimmesdale describes, in psychosomatic imagery, the nature of his suffering and the restorative power he attributes to truth, to being true, to being recognized and understood in the way he recognizes and understands himself.

"Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is, after the torment of a seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am! Had I one friend, --or were it my worst enemy!--to whom, when sickened with the praises of all other men, I could daily betake myself, and be known as the vilest of all sinners, methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby. Even thus much of truth would save me!

But now, it is all falsehood!--all emptiness!--all death!" (SL, 138)

Falsehood, emptiness, death--such are the consequences of the falling away from truth. But life, the life of the soul, the soul being able to sustain its life--such would be the consequence of "even thus much of truth," that is, the truth of Dimmesdale's untruth. The lifting of deceit, the open acknowledgment of sin, the condition of being looked in the eye and seen, herein, Dimmesdale believes, resides the pharmaceutical power of truth. For truth "relieves" the heart that "burns in secret," that is "tormented" by the "cheat" of a mock penitence, a penitence of "no substance," hence an empty penitence, a "cold and dead" penitence that is or has been in truth no penitence at all (SL, 138). Finally, truth would be the balm for Dimmesdale's "bitterness and agony of heart" (SL, 138); it would be what restores life to someone who has been dead at the very moment of penitentially trying to recover his life.

The truth, even if it is the ironic truth of untruth, is what the doctor has ordered, even if he is incapable of healing himself. Thus, he prescribes, however ironically, "God's own truth." "'Wouldst thou have me to believe, O wise and pious friend,'" Chillingworth asks Dimmesdale, "'that a false show can be better--can be more for God's glory, or man's welfare--than God's own truth? Trust me, such men deceive themselves'" (SL, 98). Dimmesdale demurs. "'It may be so,' said the young clergyman indifferently, as waiving a discussion that he considered irrelevant or unseasonable" (SL, 98). He then asks Chillingworth, "'my well-skilled physician, whether, in good sooth, he deems me to have profited by his kindly care of this weak frame of mind'" (SL, 98). When Chillingworth answers, after he and Dimmesdale interrupt

their conversation to note the appearance of Pearl and Hester, he says:

"'But I know not what to say--the disease is what I seem to know, yet know it not.'" Dimmesdale objects to this "riddle," and Chillingworth answers:

"He to whom only the outward and physical evil is laid open knoweth, oftentimes, but half the evil which he is called upon to cure. A bodily disease, which we look upon as whole and entire within itself, may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part." (SL, 100)

The physician here demands a complete description of the disease and wonders whether Dimmesdale has been forthcoming on the matter. "'Let me ask,--as your friend,--as one having charge, under Providence, of your life and physical well-being,--hath all the operation of this disorder been fairly laid open and recounted to me?'" (SL, 100).

The ironies, of course, are multiple. I will mention but three. First, Chillingworth, who at the end of the romance has "no more devil's work on earth . . . to do" and who has become an "unhumanized mortal" (SL, 183), is excluded from Providence. He is not Dimmesdale's friend but his enemy, and he both tempts Dimmesdale to further and further extremes of self-loathing and self-laceration and exacerbates rather than alleviates Dimmesdale's ill-being. Second, though he tempts Dimmesdale to flagellate himself, the temptation is part of the psychological dynamic by which the minister eventually makes the gesture of baring his soul before the law and before the church. Thus, what Chillingworth sees as Dimmesdale's final escape from him occurs, according to Chillingworth, when Dimmesdale begins to recount before his congregation the operation of his disorder; that is, when Dimmesdale follows, apparently to the letter, the doctor's prescription and, according to most of the spectators at the scene, bares his own scarlet

stigmata (see SL, 182). Third, Chillingworth's question repeats the operation of the disorder; it performs the disorder it asks about. That is, it sets up and names the condition of cure--the return to health by means of truth-telling; and it participates in the disorder the minister suffers by repeating, through the form of a question whose content asks about self-disclosure, the concealment the question ostensibly seeks to remove. In other words, Chillingworth conceals his own nefarious revenge at the moment he asks for disclosure. Even more, his concealment and simultaneous demand for revelation are the means of his revenge. Such men as Chillingworth, in the traditional reading, indeed deceive themselves.

Such women too. Thus, Hester Prynne comes to recognize the prescriptive necessity of telling the truth about the identity of the physician who prescribes telling the truth about one's identity. "'O Arthur,'" Hester Prynne confesses to Dimmesdale,

"forgive me! In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did hold fast through all extremity; save when thy good,--thy life,--thy fame,--were put in question! Then I consented to a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threaten on the other side! Dost thou not see what I would say? That old man!--the physician!--he whom they call Roger Chillingworth!--he was my husband." (SL, 139)

For Hester, truth provides the only certain defense against the effects--the possible ironies--of Chillingworth's deception and her own. Thus its necessity for her. And for the narrating voice.

The narrating voice speaks or writes as if all the ironies associated with its characters were controllable according to the power of truth to be known, determined, and narrated. When the narrator discriminates between types or degrees of moral error and describes Dimmes-

dale's illicit paternity as a consequence of "a sin of passion, not of principle nor even of purpose" (SL, 143), the narrator affirms the moral order within which intent can be inferred. If Dimmesdale's intent or the moral order itself were beset by the possibility of contrary understandings, the narrator would not be able to stop the ironies. But the narrating voice can stop them, or at least writes or speaks as if being able to. Thus the enjoinder, "Be true! Be true! Be true!"

If heeded, this enjoinder will guarantee life, as Dimmesdale thinks he understands. According to the narrator, for Dimmesdale truth is life. It is what animates life from within life, and in this respect it is the generative principle of the real. "It was his genuine impulse to adore the truth, and to reckon all things shadow-like, and utterly devoid of weight or value, that had not its divine essence as the life within life. Then, what was he?--a substance?--or the dimmest, of all shadows?" (SL, 105). The rhetorical insistence on truth as the life of life would seem to establish the extent but also the limit of Dimmesdale's double nature, of the irony of his duplicitous words and life. In his falsehood, Dimmesdale bears witness to the inaugural Christian irony: the fall from grace makes possible the return to God through the detour of mortal existence. Death is the price for the possibility of irony, but beyond irony, and thus beyond death, is the life of life--truth. It is this truth that Hester Prynne invokes when she encourages Arthur Dimmesdale to leave Boston. "'Begin all anew,'" she expostulates. "'Exchange this false life of thine for a true one'" (SL, 142). At the end of the novel, Dimmesdale insists that the terms of exchange must be absolute. Only his absolute mortification--"the torture always at red-heat" that Chillingworth administers and a "'death of triumphant

ignominy'" (SL, 181)--will suffice. "'Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost forever! Praised be his name! His will be done!'" (SL, 181). According to his own reckoning, Dimmesdale will pass through death into life, into the life after life that Hester wishes to locate in the American wilderness or back in Europe but that Dimmesdale believes can be found only in death.

One can read Hester Prynne's and Arthur Dimmesdale's respective contracts with truth in terms of their presumed motives, as many critics do, and arrive at one or another ironic view of the difference between what Prynne bargains for (a new life with Dimmesdale beyond the reach of the Boston Puritans) and what Dimmesdale wagers (namely salvation, a new spiritual life without Prynne) in repudiating Prynne's vision of a new life for them together this side of death. Nevertheless, in such interpretations the category of truth remains in place as the basis on which the interpretation of irony can proceed. What is not present to Hester Prynne or to Arthur Dimmesdale--the partiality of their respective desires and perspectives--is present either to the narrating voice or to the reader or to both. The reader's knowledge of the incomplete perspective of each character insures the interpretation, which of itself is not ironic, of mastery over the field of irony. The truths of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale may be ironic, but the truth of irony, in the traditional reading, is not. The question of irony does not challenge the category of truth but reinforces it.

In sum, the words for truth, especially the many repetitions of the word "truth" itself, condition the narrative of The Scarlet Letter from beginning to end. Within the novel, characters and narrator advance their respective claims to speak and sign in the name of the truth.

When these claims collide, they generate what has traditionally been called various types of irony. Irony does not seem to pose an ultimate problem to the characters or narrator, however, since they seem, sooner or later, to have or believe they have access to the truth that would enable them retrospectively to recognize what before had been hidden from them. The discrepancies, gaps, partialities, differences, and so on, that drive a wedge between appearances and reality are believed, at least by the characters and narrator, to be bridgeable, even when the coming into an understanding of the discrepancies occurs as an effect of the discrepancies that are then and thereby overcome. The perception of irony would thus seem to entail a reading position in which the irony has been mastered by virtue of being able to be identified as an irony. Irony would thus be a mode of truth. Even if one introduces the possibility of the irony of irony as an infinite regression of irony ironizing itself, such an infinitizing self-reference would still, in a certain determined way, establish irony as the last word. All such last words derive their authority from the first of the last words, truth as revelation. The ironic reading of truth would seem to reestablish the category of truth, even when truth is inscribed within the (ironic) delay of an infinite regression.

Can one read the truth in The Scarlet Letter, can one read the truth of The Scarlet Letter, otherwise? Not nonironically but rather other than either ironically or nonironically? That is, in a way that does not reproduce the novel's semantic frame or border, the category of truth, whether ironically or not?

Truth and the Classical Reading Model

The traditional readings do not and cannot. And one of the many reasons is simple: they presuppose the category of truth which henceforth governs their readings, dictates the semantic horizon of their interpretations, and imposes a certain moral obligation upon their hermeneutic endeavors.

What Alfred North Whitehead proposes about the function of reason in his book of that title may serve as a summary of what has been called the traditional reading position. Reason, Whitehead declares, "is the self-discipline of the originaive element in history. Apart from the operations of Reason, this element is anarchic" ("Introductory Summary," n.p.). Reason disciplines the anarchic element and also gives it aim and form (see, for example, pp. 32-34). As a form-producing "counter-agency" to "anarchic appetition," Reason "saves the world" (34). How? By a function that is fundamentally aesthetic in nature: "The function of Reason is to promote the art of life" (4). In this respect, "Reason is a factor in experience which directs and criticizes the urge towards the attainment of an end realized in imagination but not in fact" (8). In its speculative aspect, Reason's function "is to pierce into the general reasons beyond limited reasons, to understand all methods as coordinated in a nature of things to be grasped by transcending all method" (65). Thus, in accordance with the ontotheological dream of revelation, Whitehead posits Reason's arche and telos in terms of an overdetermined metaphor: speculative Reason "is a tropism to the beckoning light--to the sun passing toward the finality of things, and to the sun arising from their origin" (65). In an instinctive movement toward what makes life possible, speculative Reason "turns east and west, to

the source and to the end, alike hidden below the rim of the world" (65). Whitehead's trope--the sun--makes philosophy possible as a tropism toward what the sun signifies: "that touch of infinity" (65), the light that would light up both origin and end of light and that would be the light of light--in short, all that has gone under the name of truth.

Richard E. Palmer in his work, Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, offers another version, convergent, I think, with Whitehead's, of the classical reading attitude. "To understand a work is to experience it," he says (231). And this experience cannot be reduced to any conceptuality. Experience "is not some nonhistorical, nontemporal, abstract knowing outside time and space where an empty, placeless consciousness receives a configuration of sensations or perceptions" (231-32). Rather, experience is embodied in the life of the individual person. It "is something that happens in living, historical human beings" (232). This is why understanding is something that must be lived. Only in this way can it produce not merely a quantitative increase in knowledge but a real expansion, a real integration of consciousness, a self-unification of the person. "In the encounter with a great work of art . . . one becomes more fully present to himself" (239). Thus, "because the experience of a work of art is encompassed and takes place in the unity and continuity of self-understanding, it is tested not by the norms of formal harmony but by truth. Art reveals being, discloses 'the way things are'--truth" (240).⁶

The terms of Whitehead's philosophy of organism and Palmer's Heideggerian phenomenology and Gadamerian hermeneutics share, if not in

their methods then in their aims and underlying intentions, a classical reading model oriented toward the disclosure of presence, being, truth, the living moment, the living act, the living person in the creative possibility of self-coincidence. For Whitehead, the work of reason both reveals reality and organizes it, synthesizes it, participates in its essential creativity, and thus conjoins person and universe in the evolutionary "process of reality." For Palmer, writing in the name of Heidegger and with an eye toward the ground of truth in negativity, "the hermeneutical experience is a disclosure of truth" in relation to its "inexhaustible fullness" (245).

For Derrida, of course, the history of the classical reading model is nothing less than the history of western philosophy. Whitehead and Palmer articulate but two of its numerous versions united by the historically recurrent effort to gain access to the fullness of being and meaning. Their interpretive attitudes typify what Ricoeur calls a certain hermeneutical "faith," a "rational faith," one that "seeks, through interpretation, a second naivete" with respect to the sacred. "Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, of recollection, of restoration of meaning" (28). Although Ricoeur develops this notion with respect to the phenomenology of religion, his remarks are pertinent to what Derrida has characterized as the ontotheological orientation of western philosophy. Ricoeur's notion of faith involves "the expectation of being spoken to" or addressed by what one seeks to understand. "Implied in this expectation is a confidence in language: the belief that language, which bears symbols, is not so much spoken by men as spoken to men, that men are born into language, into the light of the logos 'who enlightens every man who comes into the world'" (29-30). For

Ricoeur, the character of the symbol--with its "analogical bond between the primary or 'literal' signifier and the secondary 'signified'"--cannot be reduced to "the conventional and arbitrary character of 'technical' signs that mean only what is posited in them" (30). In the so-called technical sign, the relation between signifier and signified is, apparently, arbitrary and conventional. Therefore, the technical sign has no power to mean outside of the context established by the arbitrary and conventional linkages between signifier and signified. The technical sign, in other words, cannot reveal in the sense of manifesting a transcendental realm, the realm of the sacred or numinous, for example. That power to reveal, for Ricoeur, inheres only in the symbol. Because of the nonarbitrary "bond" between literal and symbolic meaning, symbols can reveal; that is, they can manifest or disclose a truth through the nonarbitrary and nonconventional relation, peculiar to genuine symbols, of signifier and signified. It is, then, through symbols that the world speaks to humans; it is through their power of revelation that symbols "give what they say" (31). According to Ricoeur, the gift is the mythopoetic gift of imagination and grace (551). "What carries this mythopoetic function is another power of language," Ricoeur writes. "It is not the power of language that comes from its instrumental servitude to desire; "it is a power that is no longer the demand of desire, demand for protection, demand for providence, but a call in which I leave off all demands and listen" (551). This is a call on the order of an address from Being itself.

Ricoeur opposes to this attitude of faith, in which interpretation occurs as restoration of meaning, an attitude of suspicion epitomized by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. "'Truth as lying' would be the negative

heading," Ricoeur notes, "under which one might place these three exercises of suspicion" (32). But, for Ricoeur, the negative knowledge opened up by the hermeneutics of suspicion is not simply negative. Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud do not only expose the falseness of consciousness; they do not simply decipher the multitudinous expressions of falsity; they do not merely challenge the presumption of self-consciousness to coincidence with itself. Rather, "all three clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an act of interpreting" (33). To a certain extent this "new reign of Truth" is ironic, for this truth will not be the gift that Ricoeur associates with the light of the logos but a strategic counter-truth, an antithetical truth to "truth as lying." Thus, "what all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their 'conscious' methods of deciphering coincide with the 'unconscious' work of cyphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism. Guile will be met with double guile" (34). Nevertheless, and this seems to be the implicit irony of Ricoeur's observation, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud undertake their "destructive" projects in the name of the object they hold up to suspicion. "All three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the strategem of deciphering; all three, however, far from being detractors of 'consciousness,' aim at extending it" (34). (Thus their "double guile" is really a double irony.) In other words, the hermeneutic investigation of the illusions of consciousness can only occur within consciousness. Hermeneutic understanding is a certain form of consciousness, and if its object is the falseness of consciousness, then understanding must itself

be capable of a certain freedom from illusion in order to arrive at the characterization of consciousness as false. But if consciousness can decipher its illusions, then its illusions cannot be absolute; they cannot cover the entire extent of consciousness. Hence the irony of all acts of suspicion concerning the presumed deceit of consciousness: at some point the act of suspicion must entail a nonsuspicious knowledge, a nonsuspicious frame within which the suspicious knowledge is determinable as such. The frame can in its turn, of course, be provisionally subjected to suspicion, but not infinitely without bumping up against the problems of the last word, alluded to earlier with respect to infinite irony.

Now Ricoeur wants to oppose "hermeneutics understood as the recollection of meaning and the reminiscence of being" to hermeneutics understood "as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion" (35 and 27). But he does so only by differentiating them within the regime of truth, so that his ironic attitude toward suspicion begins to indicate an equivocal attitude toward his master category. Thus, truth appears in two guises, in guise and double guise, in Ricoeur's exposition: one is the fullness of revelation, the other the partiality of disillusionment. Even if the necessity of disillusionment challenges the possibility of "the Word as Revelation," for Ricoeur both projects would seem to sign themselves in the name of truth: the full truth of revelation and the "more authentic word" of the truth of the ironic suspicion that expands the consciousness it doubts. This irony of the suspicious attitude notwithstanding, for Ricoeur the hermeneutics of suspicion lays claim to truth as its aim and justification. Thus, even when Ricoeur opposes the two fundamental and apparently oppositional interpretive tacks, he priv-

ileges the hermeneutics of revelation and assimilates the hermeneutics of suspicion to it as its ironic double. In this way he protects the category of truth from what is thereby its subset, namely truth as lie, for truth as lie immediately becomes, in Ricoeur's irony, in the irony he points out in Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the truth of the truth of lie.

In sum, Ricoeur encloses the antipodal regions of hermeneutics within a single region, the classical, western philosophical field that Derrida has delimited. In that field, interpretation repeatedly is specified as a search for truth. What is true of traditional readings of literature in general seems to be the case with respect to The Scarlet Letter: these readings pursue this quest either as advocates of "revelation," as proponents of "suspicion," or as representatives of some intermediate position between belief and doubt.

Classical Readings of "The Scarlet Letter"

The classical readings of The Scarlet Letter number in the hundreds. The following, therefore, are representative of a recurrent type of criticism from the 1950s to the present that has borrowed its concepts from a certain tradition of speculation on the nature of reality and its reflection in art. More particularly, the following readings stake out positions that implicitly rely upon a notion of mimesis or mimetic representation and its superordinate concept of truth. In these readings, the novel mimes life; it represents textually what is presumed to be an extratextual reality. In these readings, the novel's mimetic issues--the emotional and psychological conflicts of the characters-cum-persons; the existential and theological questions about individuality and identity, about sincerity, fidelity, compassion, cruelty, love,

hate, isolation, about the whole spectrum of interior experience, in fact; the social problems of law, institutional authority, education, group norms, gender differences, the political empowerment of men but not of women, the various forms of sexual exclusion, and rituals of group cohesion; and so on--center on the question of truth. Despite their many differences, the classical readings of The Scarlet Letter tend to be in close agreement: in Hawthorne's first romance, truth--the heart of truth as the truth of the heart--organizes the novel's various representations according to the particular realist concern--formalist, psychological, social, etc.--of the reading in question.

With an eye toward the persistent criticism of deconstruction--that
 7
 its readings are repetitious and self-defeating --some examples of classical readings.

In the conclusion to his study, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Terence Martin places Hawthorne squarely within the great tradition of western literature, the mimetic tradition outlined by Auerbach.

Comic or tragic in vision, epic or elegiac in tone, the most significant works in Western literature have never ceased to proclaim a faith in the human condition--confused, imperfect, toil-stricken as it may be. It is to Hawthorne's credit that he furthers the significant legacy in both his major and minor fiction, shaping his sense of human experience to meet his special talent as an American writer.
 (182)

When the narrator of "The Hall of Fantasy" speaks to his friend, he speaks for Hawthorne and for Martin. He expresses "essentially the same preference for human existence, with its joys and sorrows, its capacity for good and evil, that Odysseus hears from Achilles in Hades and that Dante expresses at the beginning of his journey into the Inferno" (181). This preference defines the social and above all the affective context

of truth, consciousness, self, or person. In other words, the basis of reality, for Martin, is its human context; it is "Hawthorne's democratic and artistic faith" in "the idea that sympathy and warmth come from the 'people' . . ." (110). Here is the extratextual ground of Hawthorne's novel. "Committed to a belief in the value of humanity, he would respect the 'universal throb' of the human heart and regard the 'mag-netic chain of humanity' as virtually sacred" (110). The truth of this heart resides in its affections, not in any cognition, and is the achievement of the human collectivity. Truth is reached by virtue of one's participation, felicitous and infelicitous, in society, by virtue of one's relations, especially one's bonds, with others. This perspective is unequivocal.

As Hawthorne says in The Scarlet Letter, "when an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived." But when it forms its judgment, "as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed." (110)

In Hawthorne's fiction, the possibility of such truths, of truth, whether or not truth actually comes to the lips, constitutes the human project. The possibility of truth is the possibility of revelation, of truth as the last word, for individual and community alike.

Truth is of the light, according to one hermeneutic path, but it is also of the darkness, according to another. Hawthorne, writes Rita K. Gollin, "pushed past masks and even past the skull beneath the skin to the strange subterranean world within man's mind. His fiction is never more complex than in its pursuit of those dark truths men conceal even from themselves" (220-21). For Gollin, Hawthorne reveals these truths through the mimetic instrument of the mind's nightdreams and daydreams,

those necessary adjuncts of consciousness that, in Hawthorne's quasi-Scottish philosophy, aid the imagination in attaining "glimpses of transcendental truth" (43). What Gollin sees as "the truth of Hawthorne's dreams" is but one transformation of the much larger cultural dream of truth that has underwritten the western heritage.

In order for Hawthorne to write, then, he must be true to truth. He must, according to Claudia D. Johnson, hear truth calling, receive it, and assume the obligation to give it imaginative shape so as to make it still more available to himself. He must, in short, live truth by writing it, write it by imagining it, and imagine it by living it.

Within this fallen, Puritan-engendered world, the artist learns from Hester the lessons of endurance as she seeks survival for herself and her creation. He must work out, as she did, a day-to-day existence among the everyday materials of the world, often painfully, often falteringly, but as honestly as possible. He sees that no modicum of honesty is possible without open acknowledgement of "who he is," including, of course, his proper calling. If he writes truthfully, the creations of his imagination will be like Hester's Pearl, a child of nature seeing and speaking the truth and reaching, through her own experience with chaos, greater heights of moral refinement and understanding than others around her. (66)

As both the content and formal principle of consciousness, truth makes itself conscious through its human reception. Thus, truth, in Johnson's neo-Hegelian argument, leads consciousness, Hawthorne's consciousness, the consciousness represented by Pearl, the consciousness made available through The Scarlet Letter, to greater consciousness in a cycle of self-generation. The novel's imperative thus engenders itself. Read in relation to the author's writing, the imperative emerges as Hawthorne's self-address: he, too, must "be true." Since that imperative, at least in Johnson's reading, originates with Hawthorne's authorial conscious-

ness, writing truthfully completes the self's insertion into the circuit of truth. Authorial consciousness posits its teleological aim, truth, as what confirms the moral and aesthetic validity of its fictional project, a project that thus demands of itself as of others fidelity to what it posits.

Hyatt Waggoner also grounds his formalist reading of The Scarlet Letter in an image of truth, the narrator's admonition to be true. In repeating the terms of the narrative moral, Waggoner's reading paraphrases what the novel itself has to say about self and others: "One must 'be true,' but one cannot force others to be true" (142).⁸ A short while later, Waggoner ascribes this meaning to the novel's author, whose authorial faithfulness to the truth reflects his genius. But Hawthorne's genius in turn produces what can only be a kind of ventriloquistic aesthetic: According to Waggoner, "Pearl speaks for Hawthorne, as he in effect tells us when in the end he chooses the one moral among many he might have stated, 'Be true!'" (157). Once in the realm of truth, Hawthorne, Hawthorne's narrator, and Pearl all speak for each other, all speak through each other, when they speak.

Where, one might ask, is Waggoner's voice in this circuit? In voicing the truth of The Scarlet Letter as the author's truth voiced by his character, Pearl, through the narrator (whom Waggoner does not recognize as other than Hawthorne himself), Waggoner sets up a relay system between Hawthorne and his novel that is repeated between Waggoner and the object of his criticism. In effect, Waggoner dubs his voice for Hawthorne, who has dubbed his voice for Pearl's, whose voice Hawthorne has dubbed for his own. In this relay, insofar as a given voice speaks the truth, it becomes interchangeable with and indistinguishable from

every other voice that in speaking the truth speaks for everyone. The dubbing is absolutely reciprocal among character and author and commentator: each voices over the others' voice-overs.

What protects this relay of mimetic dubbing or ventriloquism from infinite regression? Only the hermeneutic faith (Waggoner writes in the name of Christian humanism) that what we hear from Pearl and Hawthorne is neither Pearl nor Hawthorne but truth, a transcendental message addressed to us through them. Pearl speaks, the narrator speaks, Hawthorne speaks. And for Waggoner what we hear through them in their infinite substitutability for one another is the call of Being as truth addressed to us. In being thus addressed, we assume the same position in this semantic relay as Pearl or narrator or author or commentator. Truth and its relay system take us into the text, even make us part of the text, but always take us out of the text to what is beyond. It is what is outside of the relay--truth--that the relay promises to deliver through the truth of the relay. In this traditional view, The Scarlet Letter, like all great literature, functions as an exceptionally effective system of transmission and reception through which the call of Being and truth is especially clear.

Like Martin, Gollin, Johnson, and Waggoner, Nina Baym, in her two books on Hawthorne, also appeals to extratextual categories--truth, the notion of person as a free moral agent, the world--to situate her view of the novel as social criticism on a psychological imperative: both Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale "must ultimately, at whatever cost, be true to the imperative of their own natures" (1976, 135). This concern with psychological truth and psychological reality underscores Hawthorne's role in the history of analytic psychology and the value of

The Scarlet Letter as a kind of textbook on mental conflict: "Even though the book often introduces allegorical or partly allegorical characters and depends on old-fashioned personifications and other techniques to bring out inner truths, the very fact that it is concerned with inner truth puts it at the forefront of the development of psychological fiction" (1986, 73). As a psychologist, Hawthorne has produced a realistic text organized around a psychologized notion of truth.

In her second book, "The Scarlet Letter": A Reading, Baym situates her understanding of Hawthorne's characters in relation to the emergence of the individual "as a historical concept" (96), an emergence dramatized in the opening chapter of the romance. For Baym,

The initial situation presented in "The Marketplace" . . . is that of a supposed division in an original unity between individuals and their society. This original unity, however, is immediately exposed as a fantasy because whatever utopia the founders had projected, they quickly had to build a prison. . . . The presence of the prison symbolizes the breaking of the law; but if there had really been the imagined unity between individuals and their society, law would have been unnecessary. Law itself, therefore, represents the rift in society, and "individualism" is defined as deviation. (95)

As a consequence, "the individual, the self, enters the world of The Scarlet Letter under a cloud, already judged and marked" (95). Hester Prynne in particular but the individual self in general resists this determination of identity: "the individual attempts to establish her priority to society, and she does this by establishing herself as the center of the law and claiming the right to judge society" (95). What Baym refers to in her earlier work as the imperative of Hester Prynne's nature here becomes the necessity of resisting the law. Hester Prynne, of course, resists both the law and its social coding in the form of gender roles, and does so in the name of love.

On the one hand, this resistance is the source of her universality:

Hester is a heroine because she is deeply implicated in, and responsive to, the gender structure of her society, and because her story, turning on "love," is "appropriate" for a woman. She is a hero because she has qualities and actions that transcend this gender reference and lead to heroism as it can be understood for anyone. (62)

Hester Prynne resists the law because it excludes a necessary dimension of experience. Although Hester Prynne's love occurs within the "gender reference" established by her society, her love transcends that reference and provides the affective ground for the qualities that enable her to honor her love against the full force of legal condemnation and that lead her to "heroism as it can be understood for anyone."

On the other hand, Baym says, Hester Prynne's resistance entails a fundamental misreading of the relation of individual and society.

Far from assuming, as Hester and so many nineteenth-century American romantics did, that the self was prior to society, Hawthorne shows the self as arriving on the scene historically later than society. This is the situation he presents in "The Market-Place": the moment when the individual emerges from the undifferentiated crowd. (95)

For Baym, the emergence of the individual results in an inevitable conflict between self and society that defines the thematic center of The Scarlet Letter and that announces the beginnings of American history, even of history itself:

To some degree, this is the movement that not only starts the time of The Scarlet Letter, but begins American history itself. American history, that is to say, is the record of the idea of the individual. And in a sense it is a moment that begins the idea of history more generally, for there is no history unless people are self-conscious about themselves and wish to keep a record of what happened to them. (95)

Baym's perspective, of course, overlays The Scarlet Letter on an ontological template, so that the romance's mimesis essentially reproduces the structure of reality at one key moment, an ethnocentrically privileged moment, of its historicity. Hester Prynne, in Baym's argument, is wrong if she presumes the priority of self to society; she is right, however, to take her stand against society, against the law, in the name of love, a form relatedness that must not be excluded from expression because it is an essential form of sociality even if it transcends society.

In sum, Baym understands the conflict between the psychological and the social within The Scarlet Letter as an accurate mimesis of what happens, and by implication of what has always happened, outside the text. Thus, beyond dramatizing a relativist view of meaning--"This is what Hawthorne shows in the novel: a world wherein different individuals and groups are either trying to persuade others that 'their' meaning is the right one, or are simply imposing their meanings by physical force . . . while the letter itself remains susceptible to a variety of meanings" (37)--beyond this view The Scarlet Letter, for Baym, retains an indissoluble tie to the world. Thus, in the last line of her second book, she asserts: "The survival of a real world depends upon the survival of imaginative freedom within it. Artists serve the world, and the democratic cause, after all, by declaring their independence from majority rule" (107). Although Baym subscribes to a relativist view of meaning for the romance--"whatever meaning we find is no more than the meaning we have made" (87)--she posits "a real world" as the nonrelative frame of reference within which the relativity of meaning occurs. In this she repeats a characteristic interpretive move of the classical

reading position: the (often apocalyptic) attempt to anchor the text in a salvific mimesis of its presumed outside, an outside to which the text, despite its conflicting meanings and conflicting truths, refers.

To this reference Baym attributes nothing less than the reciprocal survival of world and imagination, thereby linking the value of literature to the value of life vis-a-vis the specter of the end of life.¹⁰

Life calls the artist and the reader as it calls Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Their obligation is to heed the call, as we too, in Baym's view, must heed Being's imperative should we find ourselves able to hear its voice within our natures.

For Frederick Crews, during his tenure as an advocate of psychoanalytic criticism, a certain notion of voice as conscience or superego grounds his reading of the novel in terms of truth. The call of Being has become, in his reading, psychologized. Nevertheless, it still retains something of its original vocation. What Hester Prynne "principally ignores," Crews notes, "is the truth embodied in the metaphor of the ruined wall, that men are altered irreparably by their violations of conscience" (143). In other words, Crews overlays a vocabulary borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis on a vocabulary borrowed from moral philosophy, and then reads the novel through this extratextual mimetic frame. What the novel thereby reveals in relation to these two vocabularies--that of truth and that of the superego agency or conscience--is first of all a truth and second a truth about the baleful consequences of violating its superego inscription.

In explaining this point, I want to demonstrate how in Crews's commentary truth and conscience come to be indistinguishable and how Crews's criticism takes on the function of the superego, even becomes a

kind of superego that signs itself in the name of the truth it explicitly locates in the novel but implicitly locates in its own critical activity. How does this happen? It happens by virtue of the reflexive play between Hester Prynne's heedlessness--she ignores a truth--and Crews's heedfulness of her heedlessness with respect to the "ruined wall."

What is the wall that is ruined? It would seem to be both part of the self and the entirety of selfhood, both an aspect or agency of person and the whole extent of the person. If conscience is like a wall, and if the ruined wall can represent the negative truth "that men are altered irreparably by their violations of conscience," then an intact conscience preserves the positive truth of intact (unaltered, or if altered then repaired or reparable) identity or selfhood. The violation of conscience is a violation of the larger personality; it is a violation of a part of the self as well as of the self itself. Thus, the metaphor of the wall applies to self as well as to its superego agent. The irreparable alteration of a person by a violation of conscience can occur, then, only if conscience is the guardian of self or identity or person, call it what you will. An intact identity, in its truth, is the function of conscience. (Why "in its truth"? Because the metaphor of the ruined wall and the reality posited behind it embody a truth for Crews. Thus, psychic wholeness and its metaphorical image, an intact wall, must perforce also embody a truth.) Thus, the truth embodied in the metaphor of the ruined wall is the truth of conscience as guardian of identity. In turn, the truth embodied in the metaphor of the intact wall is the truth of this truth, the truth of the truth of conscience.

It is this inscription of truth and conscience, the one within the other, that characterizes Crews's cautionary discourse. Crews himself, or at least his persona and his text, takes on the function of conscience that might be put this way: Take heed of the fact that Hester Prynne does not take heed of the truth . . . I am telling the truth that Hester Prynne ignores the truth . . . Do not ignore what she ignores, and do not ignore that she ignores the truth. In other words, Crews repeats in reverse Hester Prynne's heedlessness. By heeding her heedlessness, he transforms the negative truth of her untruth to her conscience into the positive truth--the truth of his own critical vigilance--of her untruth. His critical vigilance is the antithesis of her act of ignoring the truth. (What Hester Prynne principally ignores, Crews principally heeds.) But vigilance is the quintessential superego task. Hence, vigilance "superegoizes" truth, if this barbarism may be permitted. Truth, in other words, becomes a metaphor of the activity of conscience. Except that the activity of conscience, of vigilance, of criticism, according to Crews's rhetoric, is precisely to heed the truth of metaphor: Hester Prynne ignores the truth embodied in the metaphor, but the critic does not. More than truth is "embodied" in the metaphor, however. The metaphor embodies the truth of truth. Since the truth of truth has come to coincide with an entire critical program, with critical vigilance itself, conscience is a metaphor not of a particular truth but of truth itself. In other words, we might summarize the circularity of Crews's perspective in this way: conscience is a metaphor that "embodies" the truth of identity, the truth of the identity of truth in the intact identity of the person heedful of the truth of those metaphors that embody the truth about not heeding the truth of certain

metaphors of a psychic agency whose essential function is to heed the superego injunction to take heed. . . .

Let me review the argument. When Crews decides that metaphor embodies truth, he commits himself to a program of criticism that will attempt the reverse, to disembody truth of metaphor. How will criticism accomplish this aim? By being critical, by being watchful, by not ignoring the truth of metaphor. Since the truth of the metaphor of the ruined wall is the truth of violated conscience, the truth of a certain untruth of the person to himself or herself, the critical enterprise coincides with both conscience and truth. In Crews's critical text, then, what Ricoeur characterizes as the Freudian version of a hermeneutics of suspicion would seem to embody, almost against itself, as we have already seen, a counterattitude. In any case, truth dominates both the semantic and the rhetorical underpinnings of Crews's summary judgment against Hester Prynne. The perhaps casual reference to truth, to the truth of a particular metaphor, in fact participates in an activity of commentary and evaluation, an activity of critical censorship, whose limits are the presumed extratextual limits of truth.

What are the limits of truth? For Mark Kinkead-Weekes, they are simply the limits of human understanding which truth enables us to transcend in a "haunting glimpse of wholeness from the corner of the eye," if not in a direct vision (86). "Yet for all the multiplicity of readings" of The Scarlet Letter, Kinkead-Weekes says, "it is surely not necessary to decide between one, and undecidability? For if none can be the one, it is not because they are all false but because there is so much truth in each" (85). Too much to be discursively known, too much to be contained in language, but not too much to be indicated or evoked.

Thus, Hawthorne's art "is not a symbolism drawing all referents into itself but a hieroglyph, a sacred writing (letter and picture and mirror), a verge to a wholeness that can only be hauntingly reflected, beyond, within" (86). In Hawthorne's hieroglyph, multiple strands of truth converge to reveal what Ricoeur has called the light of the logos, the Word that beckons to us from out of its numinosity.

For Michael Clark, this numinosity presents itself as "divine truth." Now for Hawthorne, "the intuition of divine truth is a difficult process" (144), and The Scarlet Letter essentially examines the way "heathen Nature" and "human law" can disrupt the process. Ideally, the process would follow the transcendentalists' paradigm that Clark believes "can be applied to all the major American romantic writers" in which "the spiritualizing process sensitizes man to a higher truth, and individualizes him. . . . The task of each individual human being is to find himself/herself amidst the triad of human community, nature, and the ideal" (136).

In Hawthorne's text, however, Nature can mislead; indeed, Nature must mislead in a fallen world. The nature of Nature, then, necessitates interpretation but also the possibility of misinterpretation.

Nature might represent truth, but it could also mislead--as it misled Hester and Dimmesdale in their sinning and as it further misled Hester in her erring idealism, which is essentially her interpretation of heavenly truth. Dimmesdale's answer to her is revealed in the final scaffold scene: man might individually interpret heaven's truth--though there is often the tragedy of misinterpretation; the community's interpretation of divine truth may be too narrow, too constrictive, but it is better to err on the safe side. Obviously, man could intuit God's truth--sometimes. Hawthorne even notes that it is theoretically possible that in the future a prophetic might attain insight into the truth, an insight that would serve "to establish the whole relationship between man and woman on a surer ground of

mutual happiness," though this prophetess could not be a "woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow." (143-44)

Several remarks. First, Clark, like countless other critics who seek to understand a text in terms of its semantic operations, takes the narrating voice at its word and presumes that the deepest and most compelling meaning of the text or the text's author is conveyed through the words of that voice. Clark, for instance, equates Hawthorne, narrator, and text, so that when the narrator evokes an image of future accord between men and women, Clark receives the message as Hawthorne's own, as one Hawthorne himself has spoken ("Hawthorne notes . . ."). Of course, "Hawthorne" may here be a synecdoche for his text or the text for its author; in either case, the mediating agency of the narrating voice is elided as Clark, without the least hesitation, assimilates it to Hawthorne. Second, Clark adverts to a philosophical category, the category of categories, to articulate the text's meaning, and does so without questioning the way the category of truth subordinates fiction to philosophy as philosophy's example. And third, Clark acknowledges the possibility of misinterpretation as a constitutive element of the human and of Nature but seems to have been able, without any explanation of his basis for doing so, to draw the line between correct and incorrect interpretations on the part of characters within the novel. Although the novel thematizes the problem of interpretation, and although it thereby pulls into itself what might have before been thought to be the reader's position outside the text as interpreter, Clark does not address the logical status of interpretation in general nor his own in particular. Rather, he surveys the novel as if from an omniscient interpretive position itself immune from the danger--misinterpretation--

that besets Hester and the community except during those privileged moments of the intuition of God's truth, which Clark seems to be able to discriminate from all the other moments of misinterpretation or misintuition.

Even when critics focus on Hawthorne's skepticism or on the way his text calls a particular logocentric bias into question, they tend to read in a classically determined way that reestablishes one or another metaphysical category. In "The Elaborated Sign of The Scarlet Letter," Allan Lloyd Smith argues that "silence and articulateness" are sometimes "the condition of truth" (78) but that other times "the novel does include passages of true speech--as in Hester's moving defence of her right to keep Pearl, and Dimmesdale's final ability to 'speak the whole,' that is, speak the letter, the apparently unutterable written sign, by his confession and display of the letter as expressive gesture, the word made flesh" (79). Here, the sign's "unutterability" is "apparent" only, since the possibility always exists of being able to "speak the letter," to "speak the whole." "True speech" defines the very core of the novel's affectivity ("Hester's moving defense") as well as of its claims to the incarnate Word. Again, on the one hand, "Hawthorne's mistrust of nature and authentic testimony from God appears in his even-handed description of the sympathy of Nature as 'that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth'; on the other hand, "unredeemed, and without revelatory power, the natural nevertheless provides a model for a 'new truth' which may 'establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness'" (77). Just how the nontruth of nature

models this new truth Smith does not say. Even in its nontruthfulness, nature betrays a capacity and affinity for truth.

Smith's assimilation of nontruth to truth, of course, nullifies the opposition that Smith thinks Hawthorne elaborates in the A, the opposition of writing and speech. The letter, even if it is "of the whole," becomes true speech by becoming a certain kind of speech--"moving defense," "confession"--or a certain kind of "expressive gesture." In either case, as speech, the letter's alphabetical and written character disappears in the affective or cognitive fullness of the word. That is why and how the alphabetical and written character of the sign, however "elaborated" it may be in The Scarlet Letter, remains subordinated to the possibility if not the immediate actuality of a speech that would speak the truth that the "unutterable written sign" cannot of itself give voice to. Even if, as Smith concludes, "the book concludes not with a successful speaking of the letter, but with yet another redaction, in which the hieroglyphic or pictographic sign is not depicted but rewritten in the purely formal language of heraldry" (80), the redacted letter, the rewritten sign, does not dislodge the "model of a new truth" nor Hester Prynne's supposedly "true speech" that successfully, for Smith, challenges "Puritan written law" when it comes to Hester Prynne's maternal right, her maternal passion for her daughter. In other words, Smith merely restates, though equivocally, the terms of the classical opposition between speech and writing, and finds first the one then the other valorized in different parts of the novel. The opposition itself is never called into question.

The same equivocation characterizes the more widely known essay by Millicent Bell, "The Obliquity of Signs: The Scarlet Letter." On the

one hand, she sees (mistakenly, partly because she gets Derrida wrong) in The Scarlet Letter an incipient deconstruction of the sign. On the other hand, she invokes a number of the metaphysical props that have upheld the classical reading position: the author as the source of the text and the text's meaning; the (semantic) concepts of meaning, ambiguity, secrecy and secrets, appearances, and what lies behind appearances; the notion of "an inexpressible inner reality" and thus the notion of something beyond language; and, of course, the categories of truth and revelation.

Despite the logical difference between authorial intention and the textual possibilities of a text's language, Bell resolutely assigns every dimension of The Scarlet Letter to what she implicitly posits as Hawthorne's controlling intent. "In The Scarlet Letter he gives play to all his mingled feelings--his tenderness for the poetry of a lost faith in essences, his ironic detachment and disbelief, and his fear of such disbelief in himself or others" (13). She then immediately equates Hawthorne with his narrative alter ego: "the agency of these complex feelings is, in the novel, a persona about whom too little has been said" (13). Once she has decided that the narrator speaks for Hawthorne, she can read Hawthorne's ventriloquizing autobiography on every page of the novel. "The Puritan ontology"--the "sacred grounding of signs" in the transcendental presence of God--"as well as Puritan morality haunted the American mind in Hawthorne's day, and haunted his in particular" (12). But haunted him not as a living presence but as a phantom of what he apparently could not make present for himself. Hawthorne's "problem is as much ontological as aesthetic; it involves his unsuccessful struggle to attain the transcendental sense" (14), a sense

that remained doubtful, even spectral, as the dubious light of The Scarlet Letter's meteor might be taken to suggest. As a consequence of being "unable to find essence in his surrounding he could only retreat to the insubstantiality of the past or the fanciful, in which one might play with the idea of significance in the mode of romance" (14). In this regard, James's shortcoming in his assessment of Hawthorne was that he "did not see that Hawthorne's method in the book was to express his own profoundest problem" (15). Because Bell reduces The Scarlet Letter to a particularity of Hawthorne's life, to one of those constellations of concern that for Bell come to motivate an author's works (though note the circularity that should interrupt but is always taken to confirm the autobiographical speculation: the evidence of the writings confirms the argument of authorial intent that is used to determine the reading of the texts as evidence . . .), no matter how problematic the world becomes, the category of self or person, of the real in its form as the inner reality of the individual and of the ability of this inner reality to express itself, remains in command of the real, is unquestioned as the region where the real comes into contact with whatever language is able to reveal about it.

What does the language of The Scarlet Letter reveal? For Bell it reveals, behind the narrator's words and behind the discourse of the characters, an authorial consciousness--or unconsciousness. What does this consciousness reveal in its turn? Here Bell equivocates. On the one hand, she wants this consciousness to be able to know something about reality; on the other hand, she presents Hawthorne's knowledge as a species of ambivalence projected onto the world (but she does so,

note, by a certain hesitant speculation that borders on a repetition or assumption of Hawthorne's ambivalence):

Hawthorne may have felt that it was his only stay against skepticism to believe in an ultimate deciphering of what is beyond our comprehension in this life. But he may also have entertained the suspicion that no ultimate meanings exist. (26)

He may have felt this, he may have felt that; he may have wanted to believe, he may have wanted to disbelieve. In either case, the novel means in relation to Hawthorne's authorial subjectivity, particularly his emotional need. This subjectivity guarantees itself through the belief that guarantees an ultimate decipherment. But if Hawthorne despairs of achieving a final revelation, and if he feels his security removed with the suspicion of no ultimate meanings, his loss of ontological ground is, in Bell's interpretation, his loss. What the world loses for Hawthorne is not lost for the category of person in Bell's analysis. (This is Bell's equivocation and would be her ambivalence, were one to read back from her text to her authorial personality as she does from Hawthorne's text to him.) Indeed, the category of person is affirmed for Bell regardless of what Hawthorne comes to believe or disbelieve, since either emotive-cognitive possibility will have been motivated by the relation of his needs, his desire, his ambivalence, his wants to his perceptions. That is why the content of his novel, even if it concerns the loss of meaning, does not presage the absolute loss of meaning for the interpreter of his novel. Even if the novel suggests the loss of the transcendental Word, because the novel reflects authorial intention, the loss remains confined to the author whose intention survives any loss that might be predicated from it. The predication frames and recuperates for the reader the loss presumably

felt by the author. In other words, that the text in its meaning or its meaninglessness derives from authorial intentionality frames what the text says. This frame limits the negativity of knowledge: the negativity is kept from enclosing itself, from extending to its frame.

But what, precisely, is the negativity of the suspicion Hawthorne may have entertained that no ultimate meanings exist? What does Bell mean by this supposition about what Hawthorne may have felt? What is the relation between the obliquity of signs and Hawthorne's suspicion?

The theme of The Scarlet Letter, Bell says, "is the obliquity or indeterminacy of signs" (9). But obliquity and indeterminacy are merely Bell's names for ambiguity. "Both symbol and consequence of Hester's and Dimmesdale's sin, Pearl is herself an instance of the ambiguity of signs" (18). Sometimes Bell interprets this ambiguity as the "opacity or unreliability" of signs: "In a way that is seldom understood and seems sometimes merely coy, he [Hawthorne] offers and withdraws, denies and provides the sense of the spirituality of life--and so suggests the opacity or unreliability of its signs" (15). Two assumptions regulate this statement. One is that the novel's signs work according to a specific, conscious, authorial program "seldom understood." The other is that the novel's signs, while they are Hawthorne's, are really life's. According to the first assumption, the opacity of signs is merely partial, since however opaque they are they always retrace the genealogy of intent. According to the second assumption, the unreliability of signs is again partial, since however opaque they are, they always refer to reality, to life. The fact of reference is unambiguous, only the content of the reference remains in question. In other words, the opacity of signs derives from a possible gap between appearances and

reality, which Bell attributes to "Hawthorne's reluctance to settle a simple question of appearances" (15), and not from a critique of the two categories themselves. The possible gap between appearances and reality produces obliquity, indeterminacy, ambiguity: "Nowhere is this insistent ambiguity more conspicuous than in the central scaffold scene . . ."

(15). There, "the scene is bathed in a supernal light which makes each detail both completely visible and radiant with meaning" (15). Evidently Bell means that each detail radiates not any particular meaning but rather its condition of being meaningful, whatever the meaning might be. And what that meaning might be remains ambiguous. Thus, the second scaffold scene "is also the occasion for the narrator's most skeptical discussion of the delusiveness of signs" (15). Signs mean, but we may get the meaning wrong. And what is worse, may not know that we get the meaning wrong.

But meaning there is. A superabundance of meaning, in fact. For Bell, the ambiguity of signs reflects a plenitude too great for the limited capacities of human decipherment. "Hester's letter is the central example of the almost infinite potentialities of semantic variety," Bell writes, and then quickly restricts the near infinite semantic play but also assures it of its semanticism by grounding it on "irreducible reality": "A material object, a piece of embroidered cloth held in the finder's hand, it is the one irreducible reality which connects the intangible historic past with the narrator's present sensations; it authenticates, is an evidence of its vanished substantialities" (16). There are thus two levels of meaning implied in Bell's view: the "almost infinite potentialities of semantic variety," which may include a range of negative as well as positive meanings, and a

meta-meaning, the A as the "one irreducible reality." This meta-meaning assures the novel of its coherence, ambiguity being the particular literary device for achieving it. How is one to understand this coherence except as the mimetic effort to represent what is taken to be beyond representation?

For Bell, the obliquity of Hawthorne's signs is their inadequacy to the last word, the word of Revelation itself. The particular "mystery" of Dimmesdale's "secret," according to Bell, reflects a general mystery.

Not merely, then, does he [Dimmesdale] not choose to tell his secret; it cannot ever be revealed to men until Judgment Day. It is a mystery too profound for us before that. And Hawthorne's language seems to suggest, it is a mystery which is only part of the general mystery of "hidden things" for which "type or emblem"--the language of appearances--provide no clue. (25)

But not quite. The general mystery is at least nameable as such; the language of appearances gives at least partial access to the mystery, otherwise the category of mystery could not be named or placed in its negative relation to appearances. What Bell calls the general mystery, then, generalizes meaning beyond the confines of any linguistic system and determines Hawthorne's text as another in the tradition of onto-theological quests for what lies beyond, in this case beyond (Hawthorne's) signs, beyond (Hawthorne's) language.

The "general mystery" which Bell believes Hawthorne suspects language cannot disclose has as one of its manifestations in The Scarlet Letter "the theme of an inexpressible inner reality": "'We must not talk in the market-place of what happens in the forest,' Hester warns Pearl, distinguishing between the unutterable inner world and the world of speech" (22). What Bell here writes about the inexpressible repeats one

of the classic metaphysical oppositions, language and the reality beyond language.

Hester is one of the great American isolatoes, who cannot speak the language of community. At his extremest, this loner is Melville's Bartleby, who withdraws from language altogether. By embracing silence, he acknowledges the lapse of a common truth which unites not only men with one another but which, by a language of signs, unites the universe to mankind. Hester's sin is not only unutterable but involves a name, that of her partner, which she refuses to utter. Her sexual history is so private that it cannot be imagined when we gaze at her in the chaste aftermath of Hawthorne's novel. (22-23)

Bell opposes language to silence, the unutterable, and isolation. Hester Prynne, Bartleby, and the other American fictional isolates "cannot speak the language of community" presumably because this language (which Bell equates with language itself) is alien to and unable to express the inexpressible inner reality that certain individuals experience. Thus, an extreme version of Hester Prynne, Bartleby retreats from language "altogether" into silence, solitude, and the unutterable.

And yet, this presumably non-linguistic constellation is a language that would communicate even when Bell claims it would not. Two demonstrations.

(1) Although Hester Prynne's visits to the forest are exemplified by the A, according to Bell, "the minister's visit is ultimately incommunicable. His election sermon is best understood when, in fact, his words are indistinguishable and only the mournful tone of voice conveys his state to Hester as she stands outside" (22). Bell concludes that "language, by implication, misleads us, tells us nothing of the heart, which has no language" (22), as if language were reducible to words, to a certain form of their enunciation, and to their semantic content. And yet Bell avers that Dimmesdale's voice, his "murmur" however "unintelli-

gible," has "conveyed" his "state" to Hester Prynne. In other words, while Bell excludes language from access to a certain inner reality, she does not exclude the voice and its voicings. The narrator of The Scarlet Letter is even more forceful on this point: "Like all other music," the minister's voice "breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated" (SL, 1172). The heart does have its language, its "native tongue." In any case, the incommunicable, which is nevertheless communicable in the release of a passionate breath, provides Bell with an image of an (inner) reality as the frame of reference for all the attempted, ambiguous, and misleading linguistic acts that would refer back to this frame of reference.

(2) Thus, silence, solitude, and the unutterable constitute a kind of counter-language to the "common truth" and its "language of signs." This counter-language does not escape the semantic field, just a particular aspect of it, the aspect Bell associates with "common truth." The isolate's embrace of silence, therefore, does not simply break off the possibility of communication or meaning; rather, it reestablishes communication, however negatively, and participates in a system of meaningful exchange. The isolate's isolation can never be absolute, only relative. In fact, the isolate has already communicated and been communicated with insofar as he or she has been isolated. This is Hester Prynne's situation in relation to the townspeople who have tried, judged, punished, and then ostracized her. Even though the word "adultery" does not occur in the romance, Hester Prynne's sin has been signified over and over again; it is not unutterable, and not even unuttered.

The same can be said of Hester Prynne's "sexual history." Its privacy does not make it unimaginable. In fact, her community has already imagined the worst about her sexual history, whether or not they have disclosed either its details or their speculations concerning those details. Hers is a sexual history that has been immediately grasped in relation to the founding principles of the Puritan community and summarily condemned.

In brief, Bell presumes the reality of the inexpressible and indicates its power to make itself felt, for example through Dimmesdale's voice, and to make itself manifest to the reader despite its presumed absence from linguistic representation. In fact, the unutterable constitutes a metalinguistic category in Bell's commentary within which she equates the unexpressed with the inexpressible.

Even without this equation, Bell's analysis of the Hawthornian sign would not indicate its incapacity to refer but rather its incapacity to refer univocally. Equivocation or polyvocality, however, do not compromise the classical, ontotheological reading perspective. At worst, they reinforce the image of the world as a fallen world, as a shadow world, as a satan-authored rather than a God-authored world. Let me explain.

In the midnight scaffold scene, Dimmesdale sees the letter A in the sky marked out by the light of the meteor; his is a psychosomatically induced perception that the narrator "impute[s] . . . solely to the disease in his [Dimmesdale's] own eye" (SL, 113). Bell describes what happens next:

But, immediately after, we hear that the sexton reported the next day that "a great red letter in the sky,--the letter A," was seen by others also, and by them taken to stand for Angel, to signify the governor's passing. [He had died during the night.] So, what are we to make of the reading of

signs? The sexton, who has found Dimmesdale's glove on the scaffold, says that Satan must have dropped it there, intending--falsely--to impute that Dimmesdale belongs where evil-doers are set up to public shame. Signs may be only the mischief-making of Satan, then, and no true tokens? Except, of course, that the token is well placed! (15-16)

The sexton knows or thinks he knows a satanical sign when he sees it. If, as the sexton believes and Bell accepts, the essence of the diabolical sign is that it expresses a false meaning and derives from an intention to deceive, then for the sexton to name a sign the mischief-making of its sender is for him to see through its falsity to its real motivation and meaning. The moment a duplicitous sign is known and nameable as such, it ceases to signify duplicitously, it ceases to deceive. The sexton's interpretation of the sign blocks the sign from signifying according to its motivation in its originating intent, the intent of satan, its supposed source.

What happens to the diabolical sign when Bell asserts its apt placement? Immediately the sign regains its doubleness and hence its mischief-making character. The sign now truly deceives the sexton at the moment of what he thinks is his clearest understanding.

In traditional terms, Bell's reading is ironic; it discloses the irony of the ambiguous or duplicitous sign. If, that is, one were to accept what her reading presumes, that irony can be disclosed as such. Can it in the case at hand?

No, because her reading position repeats the reading position of the sexton. The sexton, in traditional terms, is also an ironic reader. He interprets signs according to their ironic possibilities. Thus, when Bell sees through the irony of the glove's apt placement, she repeats the act of seeing through that defines the rule of interpretation for

the sexton. But in seeing through the seeing through of the sexton, she necessarily reestablishes a meta-irony of the glove's placement, its duplicity, its diabolism. This would be an irony of irony. However, such a double irony would render its irony or its ironizing movement uncertain, for the irony of irony necessarily becomes irony without irony or the nonirony of irony. In other words, Bell stops the irony at a certain point. This enables her to make sure that the irony stays put and that its placement does not implicate those who read the text from a position supposedly outside the text. But since the text stages the irony of the glove's placement in terms of a certain reader's ironic nonrecognition of this placement, since the text places the sexton, this reader of signs who himself is a sign within the text, within a scene of deception constituted through his belief in his ability to see through the deception of signs, the text thus sets up a potential barrier to every reading perspective, such as Bell's, that would attempt to see through the doubleness of signs. Bell's reading position has already, in advance of her particular reading, been placed within the text as the thematic object of the text's signifying play. The irony she implicitly sees organizing the placement of the glove ironizes her own reading. The only way she can determine the aesthetically appropriate placement of the glove is to have determined beforehand the limits of irony in general. By staging, in the figure of the sexton, just this (ironic) attitude toward the world of appearances and their duplicitous significations toward the necessity of seeing through to an intention hostile to the truth, the text tightens the glove's (ironically nonironic, nonironically ironic, ironically ironic, nonironic . . .) grip on the very reading by which Bell would loosen the grip of its hold on the

reader's perception. In short, she attempts to distance herself from the sexton by repeating his interpretive move. Thereby she places herself within the same rhetorically determined grip that grips him and that she would see through to Hawthorne's masterful placement.

The mimeticism of Bell's interpretation, the way it reproduces a position thematized in The Scarlet Letter, is embedded in her quest for the "true token." Bell's interpretation apparently proceeds from an ironic recognition, the recognition of the manifold ironies of the glove's placement. Irony, for her, thus reconstitutes the truth of the sign; it makes the token true. But the true token as an ironic token is one that exposes the hubris of the sexton in his false self-assurance that he has exposed the diabolical token, the false token, of satan. In his hubris, the sexton becomes engulfed by the false token he mistakenly believes he has decoded. That is to say, he comes to perform the falsity of the false token. His performance does not so much turn him into a sign (he is already a sign along with all the other signs that constitute The Scarlet Letter) as into a particular sign, a diabolical sign, the very sign he has, in naming it as such, become blind to as the very basis of his identity. Not only does he define himself in contrast to the satanical, he reconstitutes the satanical by (ironically) assuming its falsity: he becomes a sign of the satanic sign's efficacy, of its meta-signifying power to deceive at the moment its power to deceive has been laid bare and--but only apparently--defended against. Since the sexton's interpretive situation models Bell's own, Bell's attempt to determine the truth of the particular token--the glove--and more generally the possibility of truth with respect to any token becomes engulfed by the falsity that constitutes the truth of the true token as surely as

of the false token. The well-placed glove does not loosen its satanic grip on interpretation by being exposed as satanic. To the contrary, its grip is tightened precisely because its satanic context marks its apt placement, precisely because its determination as well-placed replicates the satanic context.

And what, then, is this grip. It is the possibility that the falsification of reality is the means by which the sign becomes a "true token." This rhetorical determination of the sign itself performs the satanic role--to introduce suspicion about the sign's meaning--by borrowing from the satanic repertoire the means of signification, whether true or false (as if signification as signification could be so divided).

In the second scaffold scene, then, the figure of satan and the sexton's attribution to him of a mischief-making intention and effect disrupt the truth that Bell would like to restore to the sign by determining the efficacy of its placement. Her logic specifies that the sign's placement must always introduce the diabolical perspective according to which the efficacy of the sign's placement is always potentially a diabolical efficacy. This is the case no matter what intention motivates the sending of the sign. If the intention is to deceive, as it is with Chillingworth in part, it reproduces the diabolism of satan's desire. If the intention is to tell the truth, it can only do so by risking a fall into deception and untruth, and so again reproduces the diabolism of satan's desire. Insofar as the sign, for Bell, will always be placed, there is no assurance that its placement will not reproduce the satanical.

What she finds in Hawthorne's oblique sign is the negative image of either an "inexpressible inner reality" or the "incomprehensible babble" of "the universe at large" (9). In either case, the oblique sign is an ambiguous sign, and the ambiguous sign originates in an authorial ambivalence toward what is beyond language, a beyond that condemns the human world to a fallen condition, the condition of the (mischief-making) sign through which we must endeavor to reconnect ourselves with one another and with the world. Bell's interpretation frames the novel and its author with a classical reading frame: what is supposedly outside the text--irreducible reality, inner or otherwise, meaningful or not--determines every thematic aspect of the novel according to Bell's reading of the author's intention "to seek coherence--a syntax--in life" as a "champion of our general human endeavor" while yet questioning that endeavor (9).¹²

A similar perspective characterizes T. Walter Herbert, Jr.'s "new historicist" reading of the construction of gender in The Scarlet Letter. Although he does not explicitly invoke the category of truth the way Bell and so many other critics have done, in fact he relies on the metaphysical matrix of the truth he never names to read author and text, the one from the other. In "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender," Herbert identifies Hawthorne with the narrating voice of the novel; this equation enables him to place text (the novel) and "biographical counter-text" (Una Hawthorne's biography and Hawthorne's reflections on his daughter) within a single, overarching cultural context organized by the way "systems of meaning" in general and a

certain gender ideology in particular "concert or disconcert" "percep-
 13
 tions of human reality" (285).

According to this reading, the text functions--it means, it signifies--as a transcription of Hawthorne's mind ("Hawthorne's mind was the area . . . of an unresolvable contest of significations" [285] concerning gender roles). In particular, "little Pearl is made to enact qualities that most troubled Hawthorne in his daughter, and she is eventually delivered from them" (287). More generally, "the thematic conflicts in Hawthorne's text receive comment from the conflicts inherent in his own experience" (294). (Again, the specific content of these conflicts concerns his anxieties about gender differences, especially in relation to his idealized and culturally stereotyped image of the feminine.) Both the text and its presumed outside, then, reflect a humanized, quasi-Hegelian dialectic: "the cultural construction of gender is an undertaking in which both the builders and the building materials are human beings, who are at work on one another, with works of art mysteriously conveying and containing their intercourse" (287). That intercourse--specifically, the intercourse of Una Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the text of his novel--takes place in an "ecology of signs" (294) in which each term, and the referent denoted by each term, "has its distinctive identity amid the environment provided by the others" (294).

Despite Herbert's focus on the sociology of gender, the fundamental principle of this ecology is philosophical: the ecology is a metaphysical one in which the categories of person, consciousness, selfhood, culture, text, and context form a series of positive terms--whose referents are not determined as a system of differences but as identities

that then take or are given their distinctiveness from their environments--whose interactions describe how reality produces more reality. In other words, in the cultural poetic view Herbert subscribes to, reality perpetually repeats--in the form of the "constructive" interaction of person, text, and system of meaning--its lineage. The primal scene of cultural creation thus becomes available to thought as a reciprocal incarnation of thought in culture and culture in thought within a generalized semantic field. It is, after all, the "systems of meaning" in which Herbert situates the human adventure, or misadventure, as the case may be. (The interaction of the "distinctive identities" that are nevertheless "not sharply bounded entities" nor "self-contained selfhoods" but "moments in an interactive texture of semantic relations" [288]--this interaction, in Herbert's analysis, takes place in and is confined to a "semantic interplay" [294].) Semantics--the systems of meaning--remains the ground of Herbert's interpretation. For Herbert, the core of these systems, the core of their meaning, seems to be the affective essence (despite his asseveration that selfhood is interactively constituted) of the human person. How this essence becomes (interactively) conflicted and (interactively) responds to its conflicts seems to be the archetype for Herbert's cultural poetic narrative.

Essentially, then, Herbert reproduces in his reading of Hawthorne, *Una*, and The Scarlet Letter a number of the motifs of the metaphysics of presence: (1) The notion of a text's origin in an authorial intentionality; the continuity between authorial intention, conscious or otherwise, and the text's meaning; the semantic frame of cultural productions and their interactive origins. (2) Selfhood and culture as positive terms (in the sense of referring to discrete entities or forma-

tions). Although Herbert insists that selfhood evolves within an interactive context and that a person's identity is "constructed" through the person's commerce with the world, the entity called person is for Herbert categorically distinct from culture or world. Culture acts on and even through this being; but this being retains its identity as a being, as an entity, as a person, throughout all its interactions. Self and other are separate and distinct from the beginning; their interactions mutually shape one another and determine the many specificities of difference. But there is difference to begin with. To take another example, for Herbert gender differences are apparently culturally constructed over the biological sexual differences that precede gender differences. What is culturally constructed in Herbert's analysis is not maleness nor femaleness--they are, apparently, biologically given--but the culturally appropriate constellation of behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and emotional responses for males, on the one hand, and for females, on the other. (3) Difference as the difference between "distinctive identities," even when those identities exchange particularities through the incessant interactions of cultural life. (4) Reality as a semantic field, and the interactions that constitute human reality as semantically organized. (5) Culture as the indefinite replication of the semantic field, the regeneration of meaning from generation to generation. (6) Repetition, therefore, as the repetition of a prior signification or signifying event. (7) The "construction" of human reality as grounded in the history of meaning, its systems, and its systematic influence on person. Since person and culture are already constituted signifieds, their interactions produce still more signifieds, the entire process being life's or the world's self-modification

of its originary principle and cause, the generalized semantic field.

(8) Context as the infinite extension of this semantic field. The totality of context is unavailable to the finite order of the human because of its finitude; however, context would in principle be infinitely available to understanding at infinity.¹⁴

Herbert's articulation of these motifs seems to combine two interpretive programs, one phenomenological, the other semiotic, whose dialectical interaction provides Herbert with his image of culture as a self-reproducing matrix of meanings. Semiotics provides Herbert with the idea of "systems of meaning through which gender [for example, but for that matter other dimensions of selfhood as well] are constructed." These systems constrain the phenomenological intentionality of individual consciousness which, according to William Ray, echoing Husserl's statement, "is always consciousness of something," which is

the act by which a subject intends (means, imagines, conceptualizes, is conscious of) an object, which thereby comes into givenness in the form of a perception, intuition, or image. Not only is the intentional object contingent on the subject for its givenness, but the intuition of that object constitutes the subject as an awareness. Every instance of consciousness, or intention, therefore presumes both a subject and an object, reciprocally constituting each other as act and structure. (8)

Some such notion of intentionality seems to underwrite Herbert's view of how gender is constructed. Gender names an aspect of selfhood where intentional object and intending subject merge: to recall Herbert's previously cited remark, "in the cultural construction of gender both the builders and the building materials are human beings who are at work on one another" (287). Gender, then, becomes a socially constructed meaning that is reabsorbed into consciousness as an implicit mimetic code or systematized mimetic governance of behavior.¹⁵

As I shall attempt to show in the next chapter, however, The Scarlet Letter disrupts all such semantic codes and their governance by disrupting their supposed foundation, truth. What effects this disruption is an amimetic logic, the logic of the remark, which is a borderline logic, one that opens up the semantic frame by turning it inside out and around. This logic prevents one from "turning the last page," so to speak, of the novel.

In the "Custom House," Hawthorne alludes to his desire to transcribe "the page of life" (SL, 32). All of the critics I have mentioned see Hawthorne as having done just that, as having written, in the allegorico-symbolic mode of his romance, in such a way that the page can be turned, that one can move from literature to life or reality or world or consciousness, that one can read extratext from text. However, to paraphrase Derrida, if there is no outside the text, then one must not try to turn the page so much as learn to read the page "in a certain way."¹⁶

Commenting on a passage in Derrida's Writing and Difference about the "page of philosophy," Leavey has written: "Deconstruction does not permit itself the luxury of turning the page; it continues to read the same page (or pages) in a certain way. . . . [T]hat certain way allows the infinite folding and refolding, the superimposing of the various pages one upon the other" (43-44).¹⁷ A certain manner of remark in The Scarlet Letter will effect just such a folding, refolding, and superimposing of the novel's pages; that is, it will help determine the text's "grammatological opening" (Derrida, 1981, 4).¹⁸

NOTES

1

Derrida explains: "1. either, even before it can be translated as imitation, mimesis signifies the presentation of the thing itself, of nature, of the physis that produces itself, engenders itself, and appears (to itself) as it really is, in the presence of its image, its visible aspect, its face: the theatrical mask, as one of the essential references of the mimēisthai, reveals as much as it hides. Mimesis is then the movement of the phusis, a movement that is somehow natural (in the non derivative sense of this word), through which the phusis, having no outside, must be doubled in order to make its appearance, to appear (to itself), to produce (itself), to unveil (itself); in order to emerge from the crypt where it prefers itself; in order to shine in its aletheia. In this sense, mneme and mimesis are on a par, since mneme too is an unveiling (an un-forgetting), aletheia."

"2. or else mimesis sets up a relation of homoiōsis or adaequatio between two (terms). In that sense it can more readily be translated as imitation. This translation seeks to express (or rather historically produces) the thought about this relation. The two faces are separated and set face to face: the imitator and the imitated, the latter being none other than the thing or the meaning of the thing itself, its manifest presence. A good imitation will be one that is true, faithful, like or likely, adequate, in conformity with the phusis (essence or life) of what is imitated; it effaces itself of its own accord in the process of restoring freely, and hence in a living manner, the freedom of true presence" (1981a, 193).

2

The Scarlet Letter, 183. Subsequent references to the Norton Critical Edition of the novel will be included in the text and preceded by the abbreviation SL.

3

Perhaps it would be appropriate, here, to point out how readers invariably refer to Hester Prynne by her first name but to the two men, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, by their last. (I would note, in passing, that the narrating voice itself sometimes refers to her as Hester but more often honors her full name.) This habit, reproduced in virtually all the criticism of The Scarlet Letter, is curious. What justifies it? What kind of discrimination operates here?

4

Chillingworth attempts to legitimize this desire through the alchemical analogy--he will seek to know the father of Pearl as he has sought gold--as if he could assign the value of alchemical gold, the refinement of alchemical transformation, to the debasing transformation he will

soon attempt with Dimmesdale. The language, here, plays off the father's (natural) reproduction--the conception of Pearl--against the aggrieved man's (unnatural) production--the production of gold from baser metals. If the alchemical process and its result signify an infinite gain or infinite valuation, Chillingworth's desire for revenge and mastery operates within a psychic economy of infinite debt, infinite loss, infinite devaluation. Thus, the death of Dimmesdale will not satisfy Chillingworth but will be the sign of Dimmesdale's escape from Chillingworth's private economy of rage. According to the narrator, when Dimmesdale "sank down" upon the scaffold following his "confession," Chillingworth "knelt down beside him, with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed," and repeated, "'Thou has escaped me'" (SL, 180-81). For Chillingworth, the philosopher's stone--the knowledge of the power to transform--crumbles at the moment of death. It remains to be determined, however, what happens when another stone, the headstone to a grave, is erected over the place of death, Arthur Dimmesdale's and Hester Prynne's.

5

At the end of the novel, the narrator offers this judgment on Chillingworth: "Nothing was more remarkable than the change which took place, almost immediately after Mr. Dimmesdale's death, in the appearance and demeanour of the old man known as Roger Chillingworth. All his strength and energy--all his vital and intellectual force--seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun. This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge; and when, by its completest triumph and consummation, that evil principle was left with no further material to support it,--when, in short, there was no more devil's work on earth for him to do, it only remained for the unhumanized mortal to betake himself whether his Master would find him tasks enough, and pay him his wages duly" (SL, 183).

6

Palmer continues: "This is the reason that when one enters the world of a great work of art, one does not leave the norms of his own self-understanding unriskened and safe at home; he 'comes home.' He says in a burst of ontological recognition: Truly it is so! The artist has said what is. The artist has not conjured up an enchanted never-never-land, but rather has broken through to a deeper level of the world of experience and self-understanding in which one lives. The universality of art, then, is an ontological universality; all great art reveals being. The transformation into form which is enacted by the artist is not an expression of his subjectivity; it is not 'feeling' transmuted into 'form.' The transformation is really truth, the truth of being, transmuted totally into the unity of the work of art. The legitimization of art is not that it gives aesthetic pleasure but that it reveals being" (240).

7

"Except in the minds of its votaries, poststructuralism seems to undercut the very possibility of cultural criticism by displacing the assumptions that once legitimated it. Put simply, poststructuralism,

according to its own testimony, and despite the prolixity of its own practitioners, leaves the cultural critics with so little left to do. And what it does warrant doing--endless acts of deconstruction--seems so repetitious and, again on its own testimony, self-defeating" (Gunn, 42-43).

In addition to repeating the oft-repeated criticism of deconstruction as repetitious, Gunn also misunderstands what Derrida means by text and textuality. Gunn says, to take but the first example of his misunderstanding, that "Derrida and others" have been brought by "the very radicality of [their] suspicion . . . to the point of asserting that all verbal texts are composed of no more than black marks on a page . . ." (43). Are the stakes, then, black and white? Doesn't this placement of the problem--the opposition of (black) mark and (white or blank) page, of black and white--reproduce precisely the form of thought Derrida has attempted to reconsider? The black marks in their differences from the page on which they are written are, in Gunn's exposition, "positivities" or discrete entities which refer to an empirical and thus an extra-textual order. Writing, as Derrida has sought to rethink it, however, cannot be equated with or reduced to the empirical mark nor to the empirical page. And yet that is how Gunn defines difference--as a set of empirical differences: the "black marks on a page" are "marks that can be distinguished from one another not by virtue of any intrinsic meaning they may possess, or intention they may convey, or presumed effect they may produce, but solely because of their differentiation," a differentiation he understands empirically. Thus, "this difference, as Derrida calls it, is constituted exclusively by the size of the marks, the spaces between them, their degree of blackness, and their shape" (43). Not so.

8

At another point in his study, Waggoner offers an account of how Hawthorne envisioned the "truth" of literature and what this truth implied for his writing. "But most important of all is his lifelong insistence that the kind of truth he wanted to portray was the 'truth of the human heart,' and that the best way to portray this is by indirection. The truth so conceived is of a different order from the truth conveyed by ordinary didactic fiction, by philosophy (unless, with Whitehead, we conceive of philosophy as a kind of poetry), or by the univocal symbolism of exact sciences. It is a truth that not only cannot be expressed except in the images of the imagination but, as Hawthorne thought, cannot be 'grasped' except in such images. The most striking way in which Hawthorne's work is seminal for modern fiction is the mythopoetic aspect of both his theory and his practice" (251).

9

The infinite light of origin and end that Whitehead trusts speculative Reason to disclose becomes, in Waggoner's view of Hawthorne, an image of a much more limited human light. Waggoner ends his study of Hawthorne by invoking "the true light" of "Night Sketches" in which "meaninglessness [is] shaped into sufficient meaning by the true dream." This dream is Hawthorne's faith, a faith that "could perhaps be preserved if its form were purified." For Hawthorne, "this meant validating the religious vision of his favorite Christian authors by expressing that vision in the language and concepts of a new age, without commit-

ting himself to their religious literalism, their confusion of history and myth. For the artist, it meant transforming traditional allegory into a mythopoetic art sometimes close to Bunyan and Spenser, sometimes close to Faulkner, but at its best in an area all its own. For both man and artist it meant devising a way of distinguishing false lights from true by observing their effects in the night. It meant, ultimately, correcting the dream in order to conserve it. Both as man and as artist, Hawthorne knew how to value the little circle of light in the darkness of human life" (266).

10

Hyperbole? Perhaps, except that the apocalyptic tone has played a fundamental role in the rhetoric of the West, as Derrida and others have pointed out. See, for example, Derrida's "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" as well as the "Nuclear Criticism" issue of Diacritics 14.2 (Summer 1984).

11

The description of Dimmesdale's voice, in fact, emphasizes its power to communicate: "This vocal organ was in itself a rich endowment; inso-much that a listener, comprehending nothing of the language in which the preacher spoke, might still have been swayed to and fro by the mere tone and cadence. Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated. Muffled as the sound was by its passage though the church-walls, Hester Prynne listened with such intentness and sympathized so intimately, that the sermon had throughout a meaning for her, entirely apart from its indistinguishable words. These, perhaps, if more distinctly heard, might have been only a grosser medium, and have clogged the spiritual sense" (SL, 172). The narrator goes on to describe the undertone of the minister's voice as like the wind and capable of expressing "an essential character of plaintiveness," "the same cry of pain." Dimmesdale's words convey one message and the undertone of his voice another, "telling its secret . . . to the great heart of mankind; beseeching its sympathy or forgiveness,--at every moment,--in each accent,--and never in vain! (172-73).

12

In the first paragraph of her article, Bell sounds a variation on the apocalyptic tone that runs throughout her analysis. When the endeavor to seek coherence "becomes dubious, art itself becomes questionable. Like ourselves"--ourselves, she says, speaking on "our" behalf and thereby countersigning the belief she attributes to Hawthorne--"Hawthorne may have come to feel that the universe at large speaks an incomprehensible babble in which it merely amuses us to suppose we hear communicating voices, explanation--even consolation" (9). The role of such "amusement," however, seems to repeat the satanical gesture (see below, p. 117).

13

In her recent work, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louise DeSalvo reviews a broad range of feminist and other cultural readings of The Scarlet Letter and offers her own perspective on how this text implicates Hawthorne in a mimesis of a repressive cultural politics. For DeSalvo, the key

"system of meaning" is a patriarchal one. The Scarlet Letter, she argues, "adulterate[s] the facts of women's history during the Puritan era" (120), in order to control his own past, to rewrite his past into a version that would provide him with less virulent male ancestors and that would present them to the world as less sadistic than they in fact were" (75). Hawthorne apparently has succeeded, but his success, in DeSalvo's view, in fact repeats the fundamental misrepresentation of reality, the fundamental repression of his own violence, that defines the historical reality of American Puritanism and contemporary understandings of it: "Hawthorne's desire in writing The Scarlet Letter, to remove the curse from his Puritan forebears 'now and henceforth' was so immensely successful that his rewritten, highly inaccurate version of Puritan history, which blunts the reality of the persecution of his time, is the version that most Americans believe, because most Americans learn their Puritan history, not through a history which graphically describes the savagery of the Hawthornes, but instead, through reading The Scarlet Letter" (75-76).

14

Barbara Fletcher, in her critique of American deconstruction, has made a similar point about Jonathan Culler's misinterpretation of "structure" and "event." Culler would seem to understand both terms as positive terms capable of being substituted for one another indefinitely. The substitutive series takes place, for Culler, within a semantic horizon. The series replaces the origin with a relay of infinite substitutions. Fletcher notes that "if in fact the recuperation of the origin is impossible, it is in principle available 'at infinity'" (51).

15

Herbert's "new historicism" resembles the social analytic of Peter L. Berger. "It is important to note what Berger regards as essential in culture. The very heart of the world that humans create is socially constructed meaning. Humans necessarily infuse their own meanings into reality. The individual attaches subjective meaning to all of his or her actions. In this sense one may understand one's acts as intentional: consciousness of something; directed toward something. In concert with others, these meanings become objectified in the artifacts of culture--ideologies, belief systems, moral codes, institutions, and so on [including gender, one might add]. In turn, these meanings become reabsorbed into consciousness as subjectively plausible definitions of reality, morally sanctioned codes of personal and collective behavior, rules of social discourse and general recipes for daily living. Culture, then, is at base an all-embracing socially constructed world of subjectively and inter-subjectively experienced meanings. Without the intended and subjectively meaningful actions of individuals, there would be no such thing as culture. Culture, as artifact, emerges out of the stuff of subjective meanings" (Wuthnow et al., 25).

16

"Il n'y a pas de hors-texte." This statement, from Derrida's Of Grammatology, does not mean that there is nothing outside of language nor outside of the text as the text has been classically understood. Rather, by this statement Derrida summarizes a line of reasoning con-

cerned with how "writing," writing rethought under pressure of the "trace," already inhabits the so-called real. Here, then, is the paragraph in which Derrida's remark occurs. "Yet if writing must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texte]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques' life, or the existence of Mamma or Therese themselves, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called 'real' existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation. All reasons of this type would already be sufficient, to be sure, but there are more radical reasons. What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the 'dangerous supplement,' is that in what one calls the real life of these existences 'of flesh and bone,' beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substituting significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolutely present, Nature, that which words like 'real mother' name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (159; translator's brackets).

17

Near the beginning of his article, Leavey presents an "official formula" for understanding deconstruction: "In its most general sense, Derrida's deconstruction can be reduced to a simple phrase: d'une certaine maniere, in a certain way" (43). Later on, he adds that "much of Derrida's in a certain way works on border lines" (46).

18

Derrida uses the phrase, "grammatological opening," to describe the last five texts in his Writing and difference. This "opening," however, does not describe a classical geometry, one in which the opening would permit passage from inside to outside. Rather, it marks the "in a certain way" that some texts write or remark their borders. As I shall attempt to show, the border lines of The Scarlet Letter effect the grammatological opening by opening and closing simultaneously.

CHAPTER 2
THE AMIMETICISM OF THE SCARLET LETTER

Remarking the Worst

Is there an outside to The Scarlet Letter, and can The Scarlet Letter's truth be situated there?

If The Scarlet Letter were to be Hawthorne's transcription--written copy, graphic representation, mimetic recording--of the page of life, the novel would have to transcribe not just life but truth itself. Why? Because the novel could not transcribe life without being true to life, and it could not be true to life without invoking truth as the means of transcription.

Can The Scarlet Letter be true to life even if, as a romance, it evokes and in some sense becomes what it evokes, namely "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land . . ." ["The Custom-House," SL, 31]? According to the critics cited above, yes. Yes, too, according to the voice of "The Custom-House," the voice of the novel's self-definition. For the neutral territory of the romance opens a space "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" [SL, 31]. This reciprocal imbuing here occurs within life as life's self-communication vis-a-vis the communication between its actual and imaginary realms. The site of this communication is itself a communicative nexus--the ground or territory where the "Actual" and the "Imaginary" may meet and in being able to meet have already begun to communicate. Although "The Custom-House"

distinguishes the "real world" and "fairy-land," the "Actual" and the "Imaginary," both are linked by the communication that transports "us" from the one to the other. In other words, the difference between the two realms occurs as a differentiation within the extratextual possibility of communication. In "The Custom-House", the communication of the Actual and the Imaginary defines a reality that encompasses the opposition of real world and imaginative world. No matter how fantastic The Scarlet Letter might be, it transcribes "the page of life." Despite its "fabulous" elements, the structure of The Scarlet Letter is, according to its "Custom-House" self-definition, a reality structure.

In transcribing life onto its pages, then, the novel would have to transcribe the means of transcription in the transcription. It would have to double back over itself in the act of producing itself to begin with. It would have to mark its marks, that is, to remark its transcription. Above all, it would have to remark its truth. When it does, however, its truth and its transcription begin to unravel. Or rather, in remarking itself, The Scarlet Letter writes and unwrites itself, the one by the other. It writes and unwrites itself, according to its remarking, amimetically.

Derrida's comments on the relation of the remark to mimesis will provide a point of departure for tracing The Scarlet Letter's displacement of its truth in the amimesis of the remark. At the beginning of chapter one, I cited Derrida's observation that mimesis always follows the process of truth. "The presence of the present" is the norm, order, and law of mimesis. "It is in the name of truth, its only reference--reference itself--that mimesis is judged, proscribed, or prescribed according to a regular alternation" (1981a, 193). Truth guarantees

mimesis its reference. Truth establishes the basis by which mimesis, as either unveiling or adequation, refers to and presents the object of mimesis. Mimesis functions through its reference to truth, through referring, truthfully, from copy to original.

If reference were to be displaced, so too would its mimetic matrix. How does this displacement come about? Derrida offers the following account:

Now this reference is discreetly but absolutely displaced in the workings of a certain syntax, whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke. This double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its play as one of its functions or parts. This displacement does not take place, has not taken place once, as an event. It does not occupy a simple place. It does not take place in writing. This dis-location (is what) writes/is written. (1981a, 193)

Following Derrida, I want to argue that The Scarlet Letter simultaneously marks and remarks its truth. The Scarlet Letter's remarking escapes the pertinence and authority of the truth that in the classical reading of the novel authenticate the text. The Scarlet Letter does not so much overturn truth as inscribe it in the textual play of a remarked and remarking text. The remark, or remarking, dislodges truth from its supposed place "outside" the text and installs it "within" the text as one of a number of other textual elements. Truth loses its status as the transcendental frame of the text by being pulled or drawn or forced "inside" the text but no longer as a guaranteed term. Once "inside" the text, truth becomes one among many terms whose meanings and effects must be determined by recourse to the text, not by recourse to itself, or only by recourse to itself as textual. Once inside (but it is a remarked notion of the inside, an inside that is no longer, strictly

speaking, inside, as if there were an outside the text) the text, truth is no longer the absolute context for the text but is itself subject to a linguistic context established by the text. By remarking truth, the text rewrites its supposed mimetic edge or border on the inside. With what consequences will have to be determined.

Whenever a text marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke, Derrida says, it displaces the reference with respect to which mimetic representation takes place.¹ What is the undecidable stroke--it could also be called the amimetic stroke--of The Scarlet Letter? In truth, that stroke is embedded in the novel's truth, specifically in the novel's generalized demands, "'Be true!'" and "'show freely.'"

Perhaps the most conspicuous, and certainly the most radical, of The Scarlet Letter's remarks are these demands. They occur near the end, when the narrating voice moralizes about Dimmesdale's "miserable experience," an experience that closes out his life in the last scaffold scene as he apparently discloses "his own red stigma" in a confession of sins (SL, 180). The narrator exclaims: "Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:--'Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!'" (SL, 183). I want to argue that this moral both mobilizes the presentation of truth as the aim of the narration and simultaneously paralyzes the presentation of truth in its very mobilization. The two antithetical effects of the moral--truth as a presenting movement into the light of perception and understanding and truth as the blocking or paralysis of its presenting movement--must be thought together through

the contradictions that mark and remark the "undecidable stroke" of the romance's peculiar textuality, the undecidable stroke of an antinomous textual play.

The narrator's moral offers an emphatic point of access to the question of truth in The Scarlet Letter. It offers, in fact, two routes to truth: showing freely the worst and showing a trait of the worst. The relation between the alternatives can be construed as conditional. If you cannot show your worst, do not give up the effort--show a trait by which the worst may be inferred. The conditional--the if--in this reading does not say that showing freely is impossible; rather, it says that if and when such free showing cannot occur, then one must show by means of certain traits.

Is showing the worst possible? Does The Scarlet Letter show the worst? Does it allow the worst to be shown?

The text's ability to enact its command or to allow for its characters to do so depends upon a reference outside the text through which the text's mimesis of truth would come about. If the worst can be shown according to the program outlined in the moral, then the moral would bespeak the text's mimetic possibilities. It would be the final instance of the rhetoric of the text to give the classical reader the truth. It would give the text an outside. If the worst cannot be shown, if it cannot be designated as such, if it cannot be retrieved, then the text's appeal to truth would be in trouble, for its system of reference and accompanying mimetic claims would be undermined from the start. If the worst cannot be shown, then the worst would not be the worst but already its trait, and showing freely would not be the move-

ment of disclosure but already the movement of barring that makes inference necessary.

Once again, then, is it possible to show freely the worst, to show the worst without restraint, freely and directly, without the mediation of the trait and without recourse to inference? More broadly, is it possible to show in general without relying on an intervening trait? Can there be showing--referring, the presenting of truth--in general? In being shown, does what is presented retain its identity? Does the itself of what is presented remain throughout its presentation?

With respect to these questions, the three scaffold scenes are, of course, crucial, since the scaffold is, in the narrative, the institutional site of public and collective showing. At first view, the three scenes organize the romance in terms of the Puritan community's demand to show freely in general and to show freely its worst in particular. In the first scene, the town beadle presents the community's identity in words that anticipate the moral, which, as a consequence of what occurs in the third scaffold scene, "presses" upon the narrator at the end: "A blessing on the righteous Colony of Massachussetts," the beadle cries out as he leads Hester Prynne from the prison to the scaffold, "'where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine'" (SL, 44).

In the second scene, which takes place after midnight, Dimmesdale sees from the perspective of the scaffold "the appearance of an immense letter,--the letter A,--marked out in lines of dull red light" (SL, 113). This "gleaming" light of the meteor illuminates the entire sky and "show[s] the familiar scene of the street, with the distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light," and promises "to reveal all secrets":

And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between the two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another. (SL, 112)

The third scaffold scene occurs during the light of day and would seem to make good the second scene's promise of revelation. As the site of Dimmesdale's confession, the scaffold in the third scene is the place where the narrator will exclaim about Dimmesdale's gesture of baring his breast that "it was revealed" (SL, 180).

Each of the scaffold scenes, then, focuses on actions of showing, presenting, manifesting, disclosing. But what do the disclosures disclose? Do they, in fact, disclose? What do they present to be read? Are they readable?

The Showing of the Worst: The Revelation
Without Revelation of the Third Scaffold Scene

In the penultimate chapter, "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter," the narrating voice reports on Dimmesdale's election day sermon and its effects upon his audience. Immediately prior to the processional that will take him to the market-place where he will ascend the scaffold and tear away "the ministerial band from before his breast" (SL, 180) and supposedly reveal the "scorching stigma" (SL, 175), Dimmesdale gives his sermon from the ecclesiastical counterpart to the scaffold, the church pulpit, while Hester Prynne listens from beside the scaffold (SL, 176). The words of Dimmesdale's sermon reveal what his parishioners believe, according to the narrator, is beyond language:

His hearers could not rest until they had told one another of what each knew better than he could tell or hear. According to their united testimony, never

had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so lofty a spirit, as he spoke that day; nor had inspiration ever breathed through mortal lips more evidently. Its influence could be seen, as it were, descending upon him, and possessing him, and continually lifting him out of the written discourse that lay before him, and filling him with ideas that must have been as marvellous to himself as to his audience. (SL, 175-76)

The narrating voice will underwrite this perception of Dimmesdale's incomparable power, this perception of what is beyond perception, of what makes perception a metaphor of a direct, immediate, and marvellous form of apprehension that is, finally, an apprehension of divine truth itself. When Dimmesdale intimates to his audience his "foreboding of untimely death upon him" (SL, 176), the effect is to transform him:

This idea of his transitory stay on earth gave the last emphasis to the effect which the preacher had produced; it was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant,--at once a shadow and a splendor,--and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them. (SL, 176)

Dimmesdale's transfiguration occurs as the event of the revelation of truth. But what makes the revelation of truth possible?

The narrative image anticipates an apotheosis. Dimmesdale has not yet died, though he is about to, yet his allusion to an untimely death produces the effect, and gives the "last emphasis" to the effect, of death, transfiguration, and ascension. Dimmesdale's living voice evokes an image of life beyond death but also of life beyond life; it evokes an image of the passing from this life into the next. As an incarnation of the angel of death, Dimmesdale, or the effect produced by his discourse, opens up a communication between the earthly and the heavenly, life and death, life and afterlife, the human and the divine. In him, two realms meet. Through his voice, through his flights of oration, he

becomes as if an angel the shaking of whose bright wings "had shed down a shower of golden truths." What is this shower of golden truths, and, again, what makes it possible?

Metaphor. Twice over, metaphor. The shower of golden truths is a metaphor, no doubt culturally overdetermined, a linguistic transfiguration, if you will, made possible by metaphor. The golden image of truths is itself the effect of an effect hypothesized by the narrator: Dimmesdale produces an effect which is as if of an angel whose wings produce the effect of a shower of truths; truth itself rains down upon the earth from its angelic source in the metaphorical form of a shower of truths. Dimmesdale generates truth-effects through his speech, and these effects of effects, articulated as a metaphorical image, turn the congregation toward the invisible source of truth--God--as the image of the angel passes over them on its supernal flight. As an effect of an effect, the shower of golden truths refers to truth through the narrator's metaphorization. However, the metaphor of truth is not truth itself but its image, its sign. The metaphor does not say what these truths are, only that they somehow have been "shed down." The metaphor of truth withholds the truth at the moment it substitutes an image for the truth. The "showing freely" does not take place; something else is shown in its stead.

Indeed, to a certain extent this metaphor of truth is a metaphor of Dimmesdale's continuing falsity. The "splendor" of Dimmesdale's effect is set against its "shadow." The notion of shadow has earlier been invoked by the narrator to identify Dimmesdale's self-perception as "a pollution and a lie":

It was his genuine impulse to adore the truth, and
to reckon all things shadow-like, and utterly devoid

of weight or value, that had not its divine essence as the life within their life. Then, what was he?-- a substance?--or the dimmest of all shadows? (SL, 105)

The earlier truth-effects of Dimmesdale's sermons have been equivocal. In pointing out his own categorical sinfulness, "he had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood" (SL, 106), since his parishioners interpret his confession otherwise, that is, as a sign of his righteousness and their own wickedness. Despite his distance from the truth, Dimmesdale's (untrue true) words become the means for his listeners to feel their own distance from the true. The earlier attempt to show freely his worst fails--and fails by virtue of the way he attempts (truly yet falsely) to speak the truth--since his worst is, for his congregation, not the worst but already a sign that has caught them in a structure of inference about him and themselves. Thus, when the narrator later reports that Dimmesdale has given the last emphasis to his oratorical effect, and that the (splendid but also shadowy) effect of this effect is as if an angel had shed down a shower of (splendid but also shadowy?) truths, the rhetoric of truth cannot be taken as the simple movement of showing freely. Or, rather, the metaphor of showing freely--here the showing of truth--takes place as the hiding of truth in its disclosure. Truth itself becomes a trait of the worst that cannot show itself except in disguise. When the disguise of the worst is truth, as the narrator has said, then showing freely is hopelessly contaminated. The worst is split between the splendor and the shadow of the angelic bearer of truth that is split between the splendor and shadow of the worst.

This split puts the metaphor of golden truths, the truth metaphor, in abyss. The metaphor replaces its referent, truth, with a stand-in

for it, a certain image. But the truth that the metaphor substitutes for has already been something other than truth; it has already functioned as a word that signifies the lie. The possibility of showing the worst becomes its worst possible showing.

As an image of truth, the truth metaphor introduces the necessity of inference. Again, the sign of the worst is the sign from which the worst has been removed such that some inference, some interpretive concatenation, must intervene to attempt to restore to the sign a proper meaning. Since the inference is made on the basis of a broken connection between sign and referent, there is no guarantee that the inference will succeed. As the parishioners' response to Dimmesdale indicates, an interpretive link may be made to some altogether other referent or referential series, a reference and meaning altogether unintended by the one who puts forward the trait. If metaphor is a trait, then the metaphor of truth--the truth metaphor, truth metaphorized, truth as metaphor--is truth as trait: truth as the nonshowing showing of truth, the nontruth of truth. As soon as it is possible to "be true" by means of the non-true trait, by means of what hides, truth becomes undecidable. When the text then metaphorizes or has already metaphorized other references to truth, truth becomes doubly undecided, if that were possible--remarked and again remarked. Truth remarks itself in the abyss of the trait that divides and delays the appearing of truth in the appearing of truth.

Let me restate this. In the rhetorical chain that links Dimmesdale and his voice to an image of his apotheosis, to an image of him as a winged angel shedding down a shower of golden truths, the metaphor of truth discloses truth through a trait, in fact through a trait of truth.

If the metaphor of truth can "show freely" here, it is because it shows truly. The metaphor of truth, if it can reveal truth, if it can present truth, can do so because the metaphor is true. If the metaphor is true, then truth metaphorizes itself; that is, it becomes a trait of itself. But the trait works by indirection, substitution. And since this indirection can deceive, the trait may not, in fact, reveal but conceal. Thus, truth as its own trait places itself in abyss since it presents itself in the form of a trait that does not present truth but its figural substitute.

However, truth cannot be said to simply replace itself with itself. If it did, no substitution would have occurred, no trait, no image, no metaphor, no sign would have arisen. Why not? Because any substitution, even an infinite series of substitutions, of truth for truth, is no substitution at all but the continuation of the self-presence of the self-same truth. In The Scarlet Letter, however, a substitution does seem to occur. The trait substitutes for truth. It intervenes between truth and itself. In the trait's detour of truth, the trait causes truth to retreat from itself. The trait presents by withdrawing from presentation. As trait, the metaphor of truth presents itself by withdrawing its presentation. Since the trait presents by nonpresentation, it presents its nonpresentation, it presents nonpresentation. If it presents truth by not presenting it, in some sense the trait presents truth as the nonpresentation of truth: as what removes truth from within truth. Thus remarked, truth takes place in The Scarlet Letter as what does not take place.

Although such formulations may be taken to be imitative of what is taken to be Derrida's tortuous stylistic recursions, they are not. Let

me restate my point: in the metaphor of truth that describes the effect of Dimmesdale's voice upon his listeners, the truth that takes place places itself, places the taking place of truth, at the rhetorical site of truth's substitution where something other than truth takes place.

I want to be careful in noting this. It is not that truth simply does not take place but that if it does, it does by not taking place. This is different from saying truth does not happen, for that formula-tion would merely affirm a meta-truth; it would establish a rhetorical scaffold from which one could survey the text and decide whether or not there is a truth there. The scaffold would become the place of truth outside the text, the place of the truth that is missing within the text. This is not what I am arguing. I am arguing that the novel prevents one from being able to decide whether or not truth takes place when it takes place (when it is invoked, cited, named or otherwise "shown" in the text), and this because the novel defines the taking place or showing of truth as the possibility of its not taking place or of its non-showing. As I argued in the first chapter, truth takes place, however contradictorily, over and over in The Scarlet Letter. And as I also endeavored to demonstrate, critics have tended to argue one or another pattern of meaning that would explain the often contradictory truths of the novel. Thus, the many references to truth are typically taken, though not always, to form an ironic text, but in any case a text that discloses through its (ironic) mimesis something about the (ironic) nature of the real: the novel means, and what it means to say, truth, it means to say (even if by means of irony) truly. But if the taking place of truth in the novel does not simply take place, then the novel's mimesis is shaken. The novel's admonition to show the worst

opens up a kind of fault or fault line within the text that sets off tremors in the very ground upon which the text would seem to be fabricated or to fabricate itself. The ground opens upon the abyss of truth whenever and wherever truth is appealed to as the authority in the name of which one speaks. Since every character speaks in the name of truth, every character speaks from the abyss.

In explaining the effects of Dimmesdale's sermon, the narrating voice speaks from the abyss of truth. This voice speaks from the abyss of truth once again when it describes Dimmesdale's "revelation" of his stigma.

Following the minister's sermon, the congregation marches to the market-place where the minister ascends the scaffold. There, he continues his election-day sermon--the scene is still within the penultimate chapter--and beseeches Hester Prynne and her daughter to come join him on the scaffold. When they do, he begins a confession that will bring his sermon to its climax.

"Lo, the scarlet letter which Hester wears! Ye have all shuddered at it! Wherever her walk hath been, --wherever, so miserably burdened, she may have hoped to find repose,--it hath cast a livid gleam of awe and horrible repugnance round about her. But there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered." (SL, 180)

Dimmesdale then alludes to this sinner's cunning in hiding his brand from his fellow parishoners and continues his comparison of the "mysterious horror" of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter and this other person's "own red stigma": "He tells you, that, with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart" (SL, 180). So Hester Prynne's A is a shadow--

a sign or trait--of Arthur Dimmesdale's stigma--also a trait or type--of something unnamed that has seared his heart--another trait, a synecdoche or metonymy--his "inmost heart." Dimmesdale's final words are a hubristic challenge and a hubristic petition: "'Stand any here that question God's judgment on a sinner? Behold! Behold a dreadful witness of it!'" (SL, 180). He then, one might suppose, shows freely, if not his worst, then some trait whereby his worst may be inferred. According to the narrator, "with a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation" (SL, 180). Indeed, the narrator does not describe that revelation other than to rename it, in accordance with one of its traits or effects, "a ghastly miracle" (SL, 180).

Others, of course, have underscored the narrative withholding of the revelation at the moment the revelation is said to have occurred, so that what mark, if any, is on Dimmesdale's breast remains in doubt. In any case, what is a revelation for Dimmesdale and his parishioners at the level of the narrator's story is not for the reader at the level of the narrator's emplotment of the story. Out of respect for revelation, the narrator refuses the irreverent act--this would be an instance of the category of bad, worse, and worst acts--of describing revelation. The narrating voice, then, allows itself no more than to indicate the revelation by naming it categorically. However, in not describing the revelation, the narrator turns the word and concept of revelation into a sign--a trait--of what is not shown but must be inferred by the reader from the notion of revelation, from the narrator's mention of the notion of revelation.

Two consequences. (1) If the description of revelation, in being marked as "irreverent," becomes a non-showing, non-disclosing, non-revealing trait, then in contradiction to the moral's command to be true by showing freely, revelation as a showing freely will have occurred by means of revelation's non-showing trait. (2) But the non-showing trait, here, is revelation itself: it is the word "revelation" and its concept within the narrator's discourse, and it is the event of disclosure, the reality of the bringing forth into view, within the world evoked by the narrator's language. Thus, revelation defers and differs from itself in the narrative remark that, on the one hand, withholds revelation but, on the other, offers the notion of revelation as the sign of what has been withheld.

To what, then, does the sign of revelation--revelation's sign, revelation as sign--refer? Does it, in fact, refer at all?

If reference still has a referent here, the sign can be said to refer to the placement in abyss of the very notions that traditionally guarantee reference. In other words, the sign does not so much refer to revelation (or to truth) as mark and remark it. The remarking sign is also the remarked sign--the trait as remark--since if revelation signifies itself by becoming the sign (the nonrevelatory sign, the nonrevelatory revelatory sign) of itself, this sign of revelation both is and is not a sign, which means that it neither is nor is not a sign; it both is and is not revelation, is neither revelation nor nonrevelation: in other words, the disaster of truth.

The Law of the Worst: The Collapsed-
Erected Scaffolding of the First Scaffold Scene

The structure of "the worst" and of "showing freely" in the third scaffold scene of The Scarlet Letter is the structure of the trait. This structure could be called the disaster of truth, the disaster of revelation without revelation, or showing without showing. How does the scaffold itself, the very instrumentality of the Puritan law and of the entire machinery of the Puritan state, function? What, in fact, is the scaffold? How is this structure structured?

According to the narrator, the elevated platform of the scaffold "constituted a portion of a penal machine. . . . It was, in short, the platform of the pillory . . . " (SL, 45). The scaffold is a stage upon which the Puritan state enforces its laws by publicly punishing those that would transgress them. The scaffold, a part of the larger penal machine that is in its turn part of the larger machinery of the state, thus represents the Puritan law that it upholds or that is upheld upon this holding-up structure of the scaffold. The scaffold represents the law as a sort of scaffolding.

The scaffold, in sum, is a trait of the law on which the Puritan state attempts to show forth its worst or some trait of the worst. Indeed, those who are brought to punishment upon the scaffold are made examples of by the combined legal and spiritual authorities of the state in the figures of the governor and church ministers. The ritual of punishment, which these authorities literally oversee from a balcony of a meeting house, involves bringing the guilty person before the gaze of the entire Puritan community. Everyone must witness, including the officers of the law who will overlook the scene, as they do when Hester Prynne is made to climb the scaffold: "the Governor, and several of his

counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town" are there, "all of whom sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting house, looking down upon the platform" and upon the person of Hester Prynne on whom "the infliction of a legal sentence would have an earnest and effectual meaning" (SL, 46) for the community.

As a scene of punishment, a scene of social consolidation, the scaffold brings into view whoever stands forth upon it. It also brings a view to that person. At the outset, that view promises to bring into alignment the ought and the is according to the disciplinary force of the shame that the scaffold is capable of effecting. I have already mentioned that the scaffold is part of a penal machine. It forms the base of the pillory, and

above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron. There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature,--whatever be the delinquencies of the individual,--no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do. (SL, 45)

Hester Prynne must stand upon the scaffold for three hours as part of her prison term. When she climbs the platform, the narrator says, "the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy" (SL, 47). The scaffold is thus a revelation machine. What does it reveal? At first sight, it reveals the course or "track" of her life in relation to the mechanism and scene of punishment. Here, the power of the state to punish in the name of the ought (her punishment occurs in the name of the moral law) organizes Hester Prynne's

reflections on her past and her sense not just of the real but of her punishment as the teleological center of the real. Thus, after the scaffold brings her to a point of view, to a survey of her life, the "shifting scenes" of this review deliver her back to "the rude marketplace of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled and levelling their stern regards at [her]--yes, at herself--who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom!" (SL, 47). In subsequently describing Hester Prynne's frame of mind, the narrator implicitly underscores the function of the scaffold as the frame of the frame of her mind:

Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes! --these were her realities,--all else had vanished! (SL, 47)

The scaffold is the point of view that apparently reveals the reality of her shame, the incarnation of the ought--or at least its effective trait, its punishing trait, shame--in the is. But only apparently. This revelation machinery, if it reveals, reveals otherwise.

Consider, for example, what happens when Hester Prynne is displayed, "shown freely," on the scaffold by the Puritan magistrates. The scene of punishment, located on the site and stage of the scaffold, is the state's primal scene of instruction. Primal, primary and not secondary, because it demonstrates the state's power over the lives and personhoods of its citizenry. In its power to sentence the individual in whatever way it chooses, including sentencing the person to death, the state rewrites the person's identity. This rewriting can turn the

individual into a nonperson; it can be the exile or death of the person. This rewriting is analogous to a paternity or paternal force. Church fathers, town fathers, and their model in God the Father--the paternal metaphor, of course, conceives of the law in terms of the power of the law to take on the seminal form of the father. The state and its legal code, then, legitimize--or not--identity according to whether the person has been lawfully conceived.

Hester Prynne's alphabetical mark, the A, brands her with what is in certain respects the mark of the mark (the A is a mark but also the mark of the alphabet itself, as has often been noted, and its ability to produce or reproduce all manner of marks), and in any case it brands her with what is a mark of both a particular legal sentence and the general condition of sentencing, which is both the condition of legal as well as linguistic sentencing. The A, in effect, gives birth to Hester Prynne as a marked person, a marked woman. The law reworks her identity, reconceives her. Hence, Hester Prynne's crime, adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate child, challenges the fundamental prerogative of the Puritan state to confer legitimacy upon identity, to rebeget the individual under law, in this case to reconceive the individual in the name of the particular laws that constitute the laws of the Puritan church and state. The Puritan legal code asks for--demands--the name of Pearl's father. Hester Prynne refuses one reverend, then another.

"Speak, woman!" said another voice, coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold. "Speak; and give your child a father!"

"I will not speak!" answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice which she too surely recognized. "And my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (SL, 54)

Perhaps in deference to the state's power of life and death, Hester Prynne turns "pale as death," but she nevertheless refuses the demand of the interrogators. In refusing, she denies the state's self-declared power to legitimize its subjects.

The scaffold is thus the stage upon which The Scarlet Letter dramatizes the limits of the Puritan law. Not the limits of law itself, but of its particular manifestation. The scaffold, instrument of the state's power to punish, here becomes the instrument of Hester Prynne's public and adamant denial of the efficacy of the state's punishment and thus of the state itself. The state is impotent to force its will upon Hester Prynne precisely when it is a question of paternity. The scaffold "shows freely" those condemned by the state; but it also "shows freely" the limits of the state. In this, it "shows freely" a constraint on and thus the impossibility of an absolutely "free showing."

Hester Prynne's absolute refusal to answer to the magistrates and reverends is not a refusal to answer to the law, law itself, but only that particular self-proclaimed representation--or trait--of it that the Puritans claim their laws to be. Hester Prynne's refusal prevents the Puritan law from begetting or conceiving itself, from scaffolding itself, as it were. To this point, Peggy Kamuf has observed that the meaning of Hester Prynne's punishment, the meaning of the way the law has been applied to her in forcing her to wear the scarlet letter, carries some doubt which the law itself generates but tries to remove. Kamuf notes how the extraordinary character of the A Hester Prynne has embroidered--its "fantastic flourishes of gold thread," its "fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy," its "effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore," its "splendor . . . greatly

beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony" (SL, 43)--provokes a murmur of righteous indignation from several gossips who, Kamuf says, "quarrel about the magistrates' judgment on Hester" (80). One suggests the A were better branded on her forehead, another that she should be put to death. A third believes that the letter mocks the law, the very law the town beadle declares makes of "the righteous Colony of the Massachusetts" a place "where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine" (SL, 44). Kamuf notes the problem: "By means of the counterpoint of the woman's chorus of gossips, which disputes the law as applied to Hester, and the official representation of the law, which drags iniquity out into the sunshine, a question is allowed to surface about the meaning of this punishment as an instance of the law's application" (80-81). How is this question resolved? According to the narrator, it is resolved by the presence of the state officials whose presence above the scaffold (but "as part of the spectacle" [SL, 46]) guarantees, the legitimacy of their sentence. Kamuf, however, disputes the narrator. "In other words," she says, according to the narrator:

It is the presence of the theocratic state's officials, their self-display on the balcony dominating the scaffold, that dissipates the potential ambiguity of this instance of the law's application of its mark upon the guilty subject. But with this suggestion, we see that the ambiguity has been not so much resolved as displaced upwards onto the personages who both guarantee the meaning of the spectacle as if from some transcendent position, and yet are themselves "part of the spectacle" they guarantee. (81)

Here is the dream and wish of the Puritan law: to guarantee itself in guaranteeing as if from outside the spectacle the meaning of the spectacle in which it participates.

However, unless the representatives of the law are above the law, their presence cannot guarantee anything of the sort. Their presence may affirm for the gossips the pertinence of the law's application, but their presence performs no such affirmation for Hester Prynne. The gossips whisper their doubts about the sentencing to one another but are quickly silenced by one of their own who supports the magistrates. Not so Hester Prynne. She talks back to the authorities, openly refuses their question or demand, and so denies them their prerogative. Hester Prynne's refusal, then, indicates what the Puritan state cannot see of itself, that Puritan law is not law itself, but only one configuration of law's possibility.

Law itself marks off the legal and the illegal but contains them both in their separation. Thus, nothing can be outside law; no person, guilty or innocent, remains unmarked by law's ability to determine guilt or innocence. There is no position out of law's reach, especially not the position of the outlaw, since law names and determines the very condition of the outlaw. In other words, in making possible the boundary between the legal and illegal, law reaches across their difference. To paraphrase Derrida, there is no outside-the-law, no outside law.²

The Puritan theocracy, although it issues its particular laws, does not issue law itself because it cannot issue its issuing of its laws. It cannot beget itself. There will always be the possibility of a Hester Prynne who will force the state to display its impotence to bring every aspect of the state within the state's definition of the legal. The state cannot reduce law to legality, since legality requires its antithesis to be constituted as such. In breaking the particular laws against adultery, illegitimate pregnancy, and bastard children, Hester

Prynne upholds the law of these laws, since the law of law, as I mentioned, produces legality only in its difference from illegality. Without the other side of the legal, the legal as such does not exist.

The Puritan law requires, if not the actuality of transgression, the possibility of transgression. That is the law of its lawfulness. Hester Prynne enacts the possibility and does so in the name of the Father of fathers, in the name of the fathering of fathering, a name that indicates the derivative status of all the particular Puritan laws and above all the status of the Puritan officials not as Father but as fathers. Town and church fathers have themselves been fathered; they do not father themselves. Town, state, and church do not establish themselves; their self-positing always represses the contingencies of their
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 advent.

In its attempt to encompass law itself, the Puritan legal code--the trait of law--invariably generates contradictory commands. I return, again, to Kamuf's analysis. The Puritan code forbids ostentatious display; it also demands full disclosure, full display, of iniquity and hence of criminality.

[T]he letter is an instance of display in two senses of the word, one of which the law invokes as the instrument of righteous truth in this "land where iniquity is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people" [SL, 49]; the other of which the law--as sumptuary regulation--condemns as ostentatious expenditure. Thus, to make an ostentatious display of the law's display of guilt--as Hester's letter does--is to dissociate that law from itself in a fashion (the word is appropriate here) that leaves a doubt about the certain meaning of the symbol by which the law manifests itself to the community. In the face of this uncertainty, one may wonder how the simple presence of these dignified men [the governor, his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers, mentioned above] could guarantee the effectual meaning of a legal sentence and what

mark or sign assures the spectator that that
 presence in fact represents the legality of the law.
 (81)

Kamuf does not relate the simultaneous and simultaneously impossible
 "prescription and proscription of display" (Kamuf, 82) to the romance's
 moral, but her remark that the "letter makes known the duplicity within
 the law itself" (82), that is, within the Puritan laws themselves,
 accords with this relation.

The demand for the disclosure of evil--and criminality--thus brings
 the system of Puritan legality to a point of mimetic crisis: to search
 out wrong is not to prevent wrong from having occurred but to restage
 its performance. It is to allow wrong to manifest itself, to show
 itself upon the scaffold of legality. To seek out iniquity is to force
 it to repeat. (Without some form of repetition, the iniquity would not
 be able to be identified.) The illegality must be reenacted, but
 safely, which is to say not too exactly. The resemblance must be close
 enough for the model to be recognized but not too close for the reenact-
 ment to constitute a second crime. The replay must not be the crime but
 its representative, its trait. Some mimesis must take place, but not
 too much, for too much mimesis would overwhelm the judicial framework of
 the crime's replay, making of the display of wrong another wrong.

The too much of mimesis, however, has already occurred. How so?

What prevents the replay of the iniquitous event from being another
 iniquitous event is the judicial setting, the context of the judicial
 proceedings that demand the display or replay to begin with. This
 context, however, is unstable in fact and in principle. In fact, the
 gossips see Hester Prynne's letter as a mark of pride and hence as a
 second sin and crime, all the worse for being a mock of the law. They,

in effect, have framed her display differently from the magistrates, and their contextualization has reconstituted her behavior as illegal. But if the same display of the letter can be legal in one context and illegal in another, then in fact the display will never of itself be either legal or illegal. The display of the letter--the punishment for the first crime, the symbolical reminder of it, the metaphorical substitute for it, its perpetual replay in the trait that stands for it--cannot be determined as either legal or illegal except by recourse to some context. Again, however, context can in fact always miss the mark, always miss in its mark, as the gossips' indignant denunciations of Hester Prynne and their calls for harsher, more appropriate punishment testify. According to their point of view, as we have seen, the letter is an iniquitous display--an excessive representation, an excessive mimesis--of her original iniquity.

In practice, point of view can always be counterpointed. This possibility is not just empirical, however, but logically entailed in the very notion of context. If context determines the legality or illegality of an act or event, what determines the legality or illegality of this context? Only another context, which in its turn can be contextualized or recontextualized ad infinitum. In principle, one can always appeal to another context in order to redefine the judgment given within a particular context. One can always imagine a context in which what is an illegal act in another context becomes legitimate. Only a supreme context, something like a supreme court, can stop the play of recontextualization. And the moral of The Scarlet Letter, the law that seems to govern its textuality, itself inscribes what is one of the traditional names for absolute context--truth as revelation--within the

potentially endless play of the trait's recontextualization of truth. In other words, the moral contextualizes what has traditionally been the very source of mimetic contextualization. It draws truth into the play of truth's supplementation. By being able to simulate and thus dissimulate truth, the trait of truth exceeds truth. As what supplements truth by reshowing truth in one or another figural guise, it dissimulates truth; it exceeds its mimesis of truth by revealing the power of every trait to become a possible sign of truth, which is to say by revealing the power of every trait to withhold or withdraw truth's revelation and revelation's truth. In a word, the trait remarks the revelation of truth; it disseminates truth in the amimetic field--a disseminating field (of context and countercontext capable of recontextualizing one another without end) that is not the property of any would be self-fathering fathers--of the trait. The logic of the trait is an amimetic logic, the amimetic logic of every context's countercontext.

The scaffold, which would uphold the Puritan law that constructs the scaffold, becomes the stage--the dramatic context--for the revelation of the state's inability to reveal itself in its attempted self-contextualization or self-scaffolding as self-scaffolding. The scaffold thus represents--amimetically--its impossibility: the scaffolding of the Puritan state collapses in its erection; it fails to uphold the state in its upholding of the state.

The Light of the Worst:
The Suspended Reference of the Second Scaffold Scene

Both the third and the first scaffold scenes, then, stage revelation as the impossibility of showing freely the worst: the worst is already a sign of a sign, and its showing already something other than

its showing. In the third scene, revelation differs from and defers itself. If the third scene stages the difference of revelation, the first scene stages this staging in terms of the difference of the Puritan law and its collapsed-erected scaffolding. Both scenes fail to deliver on the promise of an extra-textual reference, a reference to an abiding truth or meaning or reality the essential nature of which could become the pattern of human governance. The scaffold is the failure of the attempt to construct on the "inside" of the Puritan state the supposed transcendental framework of the "outside," just as revelation is the failure of the attempt to transfer truth from the "outside" and present it on the "inside" of the text.

Although revelation is not named as such in the first scene, a host of related terms (including "view," "spectacle," "witness," "testimony," and so on) are invoked as is the motif of disclosure. The law announces its demands, in the aforementioned words of the beadle, in terms of the state's declaration of its identity as the place where the worst is shown freely in the light of day. Hence, the institutional promise to show freely its worst is articulated in terms of light. What is to be revealed upon the scaffold is to be brought forth into the light, into view. The demand to show the worst--in the first scene, the demand to know the father--is the law's promise of sight and insight and more generally, revelation.

The second scaffold scene forecloses on the promise. In the second as in the first scene, the architecture of the law's promise does not raise the wrongdoer and his or her wrong into the light of disclosure but raises into view the limits of the demand to raise into view; it raises into view the limits of raising into view. In the second scene,

the medium of revelation, light, fails to perform its mediating function. The second scaffold scene, then, stages the difference of the light of revelation and the difference of raising into view as yet another textual remarking of its truth.

The second scene takes place at night, "an obscure night of early May," when "an unvaried pall of cloud muffled the whole expanse of sky from zenith to horizon" (SL, 107). Dimmesdale "steals" out of his church into this "ugly night"; "walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism" (SL, 107), he reaches the scaffold. When he climbs up, the pall of clouds hides him from view. The beclouding within this scene will soon become the beclouding of this scene.

In fact, the suggestion of Dimmesdale's somnambulism would seem to compromise the supposed reality of the scene that follows in one of two ways. (1) If Dimmesdale walks under "the shadow of a dream," then both words, "shadow" and "dream," cast a pall over the scene: Dimmesdale's somnambulism constitutes a psychic pall just as the image of the shadow recalls the moral pall that has hung over the minister. (2) As a speculation on the narrator's part, the suggestion of a dreamscape casts a narrative pall over the subsequent scene. In either case, at both the level of the story and its emplotment, what happens in the second scaffold scene has been multiply marked: what takes place in the scene may not take place, or may take place only within the realm of the "imaginary," the imaginary of Dimmesdale's possible somnambulism here doubling the imaginary of the narrator's speculation.

In the meantime, the narrator imagines that Dimmesdale thinks his midnight vigil "the mockery of penitence" (SL, 108) and records Dimmes-

dale's appalling sense of being watched. "And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart" (SL, 108). The "vanity" of Dimmesdale's "vain show" underscores the nonoccurrence of what supposedly occurs in this scene.

Eventually, Hester Prynne, who has been at the deathbed of Governor Winthrop, and Pearl join Dimmesdale. They talk. Dimmesdale holds Pearl's hand and feels "what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life" (SL, 111). Then, in answer to Pearl's question, he says that he will not stand upon the scaffold in the light of day with Hester Prynne and her but will "at the great judgment day" (SL, 112). Immediately, there is a light, "doubtless" caused by the passing of a meteor.

So powerful was its radiance, that it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of cloud betwixt the sky and earth. The great vault brightened, like the dome of an immense lamp. It showed the familiar scene of the street, with the distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light. (SL, 112)

Everything this light brings into view is, in the aforementioned citation, "made visible, but with a singularity of aspect that seemed to give another moral interpretation to the things of the world than they had ever borne before" (SL, 112). The meteoric light, in lighting up the world, seems to "present" the world in another light, that is, in another interpretive context. Thus, this light that is "as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets . . ." (SL, 112) presents the light of presentation, the light of revelation, as the structure of another inference. Does revelation, then, occur? Can it occur?

On the one hand, the narrator implies no, though Dimmesdale believes yes. To Dimmesdale, the light reveals an A; in fact, it manifests itself as the letter a "marked out in lines of dull red light" (SL, 113). To the narrator, however, the supposedly revelatory light is delusive. Despite its ability to "show the familiar . . . with the distinctness of mid-day," this light is an "as if" light of revelation. In fact, the narrator says that Dimmesdale sees in the meteoric light but a projection of his own morbid egotism. "Addressed to himself alone," Dimmesdale's purported revelation "could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (SL, 113). What Dimmesdale takes to be the light of revelation, the narrator takes to be a symptom. For the narrator, revelation as such does not occur and in fact is assimilated to a particular psychologized version of the trait in which the previous radiance of the light is now "dull red" and "burning duskily through a veil of cloud":

We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter,--the letter A,--marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud; but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it; or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another's guilt might have seen another symbol in it. (SL, 113)

The narrator, of course, must deny the appearance of the A over the world, for otherwise the world itself would be traited or traitized by the A and thus would be irremediably marked and remarked in being marked.

For the narrator, revelation does not--must not--occur. What previously "showed the familiar scene of the street, in the distinctness of mid-day" now shines with "so little definiteness" as to show nothing other than its own relative luminance, a relativity doubled in the ambiguity of the symbolic shape this light seems to take for some eyes. Insofar as this light lightens only itself, insofar as it lightens only its source, this light does not function as the light of perception that one could see by; it is a light that interrupts itself. Insofar as this light forms a shape--a symbol, according to the narrator--the light again ceases to function as the light of perception. As a symbol, it is, indeed, an "as if" light of revelation. Once again, it lightens only its source, this time the (guilty) perception of the viewer who would see in it one of "so many revelations from a supernatural force" (SL, 113). Dimmesdale and, as we shall see shortly, his compatriots attempt to refer the light-as-symbol to a transcendental reality. This attempt, in fact, forces them away from the light-as-showing to the light-as-trait; it forces them into the necessity of inference. Either way, revelation as revelation does not occur: its light bends back on its supposed source to reveal a pseudo-revelation, a non-revelation.

On the one hand, the narrator shows that no revelatory showing other than a vain simulation of a revelation takes place. On the other hand, having denied that the light formed an A and having attributed this belief or perception to the minister's "disordered mental state," the narrator soon cites the sexton's words to Dimmesdale the next day: "'But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night? A great red letter in the sky,--the letter A . . . ?'" (SL, 115). The sexton interprets the A "'to stand for Angel. For, as our good Governor

Winthrop was made an angel this past night, it was doubtless held fit that there should be some notice thereof!" (SL, 115).

Two or three comments. The text is undecided about the meteoric event⁴ and extends the undecidability to the medium of the event, the light. In presenting incompatible statements about the meteor light, the text performs its undecidability. Since the narrating voice aligns itself with one of two incompatible views but presents both views as undecidable, it places itself in abyss: its perspective on the minister's perspective reproduces the problematic of what is or is not brought into view, into the undecidable light. In other words, the second scaffold scene questions whether revelation--the bringing into view of truth--occurs, but also questions this questioning by rendering the narrator's "presentation" self-contradictory. The romance's moral offers the possibility of showing freely the worst; the second scaffold scene, however, withdraws the offer and also withdraws the withdrawal of the offer that has been withdrawn and cannot be restored. The worst in particular and revelatory showing in general do not occur. But neither does the nonoccurrence occur. Which means that the worst, as the possibility of extratextual reference, as the possibility of mimesis, is suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence whenever the worst occurs or does not occur.

This suspension of reference duplicates the suspension of reference in the minister's glove that we have already examined with respect to Bell's analysis of the second scene. The minister's glove--dropped, the sexton says to the minister, by satan who "intend[ed] a scurrilous jest against your reverence" (SL, 115)--once again shows the impossibility of showing the worst free from the grip of inference. In Dimmes-

dale, the grip of inference is guilty; in satan, it is diabolical. The second scene implicates the two forms of inference, the one within the other in the "same" glove, the glove being turned one way and the other to fit whoever comes to take on the task of inference. The sexton's interpretation indicates the vulnerability of the mimetic reading position: only if he knows or believes he knows in advance that a system of anchored reference is in place can he determine the reference of the particular sign in question. Since the text indicates that the sexton misses the reference, the "scurrilous jest" is all the stronger, all the more successful. The satanic joker is the playing of the amimetic card against the mimetic.

Like the other two scaffold scenes, this one shows the impossibility of showing the worst. In the second scene, the medium of perception, a kind of perceptual scaffolding, if you will, disperses the light of disclosure and brings into focus the loss of focus that cannot be overcome at the focal moment itself, the moment of revelation. When that moment becomes a subject of discourse for the Puritan community, it immediately assumes the status of a "spectacle," "portent," "prefiguration," "hieroglyph" (SL, 113)--a trait, not the thing itself but its sign, not revelation but only its undecidable indication. The glove, the trait of the text's grip on the attempt to move outside the text, grips revelation itself such that revelation only indicates, if it can be said to indicate at all, its failure to indicate what its referent, in truth, is. Once again, the romance is mimetically unreadable to the extent that it puts out of play the possibility of the outside-the-text.

The Textual Law of "The Scarlet Letter": The Trait

The narrator's moral offers a point of access to the general textual law of The Scarlet Letter. The narrating voice calls special attention to the moral in a number of ways. The moral is only one from among the many that might have been adduced. It is set off in quotation marks (it is, by the way, one of only two citations that are not attributed to someone within the romance). And its demand, to be true, is repeated three times in an insistent exclamation that could be said to echo or cite itself. It is not that the narrating voice addresses the reader with a command to be true; rather, this voice cites a sentence that addresses the reader. Unanchored from any particular voice, it is as if the words of the sentence speak, as if the moral speaks. When, within the citation that constitutes the moral, the command to be true is repeated, the emphatic repetition has a self-referential quality; the moral speaks as if it speaks itself.

The narrating voice marks the moral and underscores its significance, offering it as a privileged reading of the romance up to that point. Since it is a privileged citation, and since it interprets the romance of which it is an element, the moral raises a number of questions about itself and how it functions. For example, in terms of what we have seen is the (non)occurrence of truth and revelation, how can the moral perform the demand it expresses? How can it perform itself? How can it be true, whether to itself or to anyone else? How can it show anything, including itself? What would be the worst with respect to this moral that the narrating voice presents? What would be the moral's worst? What would be the trait of this sentence's worst? Is the moral itself not the worst as well as its trait? Is it the worst trait of the

romance? As one among many, is the moral not an example of how the minister's experience could or should be interpreted, and thus a trait--of the worst? Would it then not begin to designate the category of the moral (of which this particular moral would be an instance) and hence itself as somehow the worst? The worst of what? The worst of interpretations? Interpretation--inference--as the worst that can befall a reader? If the quotation marks qualify the presentation of the moral, does the qualification participate in the presentation of the moral, perhaps as one of its traits? In sum, how does the moral partake in the differentiated system of presentation--showing freely versus showing by the trait--that it presents? The sentence is going to say that there are different ways of showing. How does the moral participate in the already differentiated system of what it is going to say? If the place of the worst can be occupied by a substitute for the worst, what takes place in the place of the worst? The worst, or something other than the worst, the worst's substitute, its own (worst) supplementation? Is the worst not, therefore, always already its own trait? Always already other than and other to itself? Cut through by what makes it different from itself? Undecided between what it is--the worst--and is not--the substitutive trait of the worst? Undecided between what it is in not being what it is and what it is in being what it is not?

Such questions sketch the problem of the moral in relation to its proffered position within the romance as what encompasses the text from the outside. This double positioning folds the text over itself, folds the place of showing the worst in such a way that this place replaces itself. This folding, however, does not unify the text but divides and

delays it at one of its supposed edges. I now want to specify this textual operation in terms of the moral's structure.

In relation to truth, to showing freely, the trait as trait works against disclosure. As I have mentioned, the trait is not the worst but its substitute. To show freely the trait rather than the trait's reference is to interrupt the very essence of showing freely as the movement of truth's self-manifestation. Thus, as soon as one is permitted to show freely (by means of) a trait rather than (by means of) the thing itself, one is immediately freed from the entire force and range of the imperative--to show, to show freely, to show (freely) the worst. I want to spell out this consequence in detail.

The freedom to show the trait of one's worst absolutely interrupts the very possibility of showing freely without the mediation of traits.

The trait, as trait, entails its own demand, the demand for interpretation (for inference, to use the vocabulary of the moral). But the demand for interpretation opens the possibility--indeed, the structural necessity--of misinterpretation. If the trait permits an inference of one sort, it necessarily permits an inference of another sort. This is the case in principle, since to be able to be a trait, for example of the worst, it must bear no intrinsic relation to its referent. (If it were equivalent to its referent, if the trait could reveal only the one referent, not only would there be no need to infer its signified content, there would be no basis for, no possibility of inference. There would be no trait.) In order to be a trait, the trait must be capable of being transferred to another context, that is, of being called upon to carry a different signification as its context changes. Which means, of course, it was also never in context to begin with. The trait

disrupts the context of an initial context. It is not that the trait signifies one meaning in one context and then another meaning in a different context but that it exceeds the determination of its meaning by any given context. The trait sets in motion an endless series of contexts within which each inference tries to pin it down. Context does not make the trait possible but, rather, is itself made possible by the trait.

As Derrida has demonstrated in "Signature Event Context," because a written sign, "in the current meaning of this word, is a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it" (181-82), because the written sign can function in a context other than the one in which it has been emitted or produced, therefore "a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context" (182). It can break with its context because, as writing, it is repeatable and because, as repeatable, it is repeatable outside of any one particular context. "This breaking force [force de rupture] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text" (182; brackets in the original). Derrida continues: "the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift" (182). The sign, Derrida says, can be lifted from one contextual chain of signification and placed--repeated, rewritten, reinscribed--in another where it will, of course, continue to function, however differently.

Thus, "no context can entirely enclose it" (182). It is, in other words, always already out of context whenever it is in context. What is at issue, then, is the "structural possibility of [the mark's] being weaned from the referent or the signified (hence from communication and from its context). . . . The absence of referent . . ."--what I would call the amimetic absence of the referent, amimesis--"constructs the mark; and the potential presence of the referent at the moment it is designated does not modify in the slightest the structure of the mark, which implies that the mark can do without the referent" (183).

What Derrida says about the mark applies to the "trait" of The Scarlet Letter: in its form as the "trait," the mark must be able to be drawn into still other traits or chains of traits. If one meaning can be inferred from a trait, other meanings must in principle also be inferable. If other meanings are inferable, then the structure of inference removes from the trait any power to assure itself of its referent and thus any power to fix truth or to be the means by which its user can be assured of being true. The structural possibility of being severed from its referent--of being out of context no matter the context --gives The Scarlet Letter's trait its non-, ana-, or amimetic power; it marks the mark's and trait's amimesis. In relation to the amimetic field, the trait, like the mark, removes the assurance of truth; beyond removing this assurance, it removes truth "itself."

That the sign necessitates misinterpretation is the case in principle. It is also the case in fact, as the moral indicates in the open-endedness of its invitation to infer: the trait offers only the possibility of the specified inference; what "may be inferred" may also not be inferred.

Again, the possibility that the sign will not disclose the worst is a constitutive requirement of the sign's signification: the sign could not signify without being able to signify otherwise. This otherwise does not make the sign ambiguous in the sense of semantically varied, multivalent, lexically rich. In some sense it impoverishes the sign by forestalling what it has been intended to convey. The trait, then, does not necessarily show freely the worst; rather, it intervenes between the act and object of disclosure. Rather than making this object manifest, the trait is always potentially able to keep it latent, to hide it. The possibility that the trait will mislead defines a constitutive necessity of the trait. This necessity answers the demand of the imperative to be true with a counter demand. The two cannot be summed; they are incommensurable.

To put the matter another way, the moral defines the necessity of truth, of being true, in terms of showing freely, but then it installs the trait at the rhetorical site, in fact as the rhetorical site, of this manifestation. The trait thus comes to occupy the place of truth; in standing in the place of truth, it comes to replace truth in the double sense of substituting for truth and placing truth elsewhere, in a word, displacing it.

Since the first of the moral's two routes to truth--a direct showing, a showing freely--is impossible, only the second route remains--an indirect showing through traits. But this is a possibility impossibly doubled: showing freely as showing by the action of the trait, showing freely as showing by the action of not-showing. In other words, in order to show the truth and still be a trait, the trait must be structurally capable of not showing the truth. The moral announces

that truth can be disclosed through the trait. But the trait can also not disclose the truth, even at the very moment it is taken to disclose the truth and so disrupts the possibility of true or not true. This disruption is not a chance occurrence but a structural necessity of the trait. Thus, the possibility that truth can be disclosed through the trait is the possibility of its nondisclosure; it is the possibility of the trait's nondisclosive disclosure, its disclosing nondisclosing. The trait performs and violates its semantic operation simultaneously, the one within the other.

If one marks oneself by showing freely, the trait marks one's mark; it remarks this self-marking such that the truth is already withdrawn in the action that would define the truthful gesture. Henceforth, the act of showing becomes undecidable between disclosure and the nondisclosure of disclosure, revelation and the withdrawal from revelation within revelation, admission and admission's retraction of itself in its admission, in short, truth and the lie of truth. The trait--the mark and the remark of the mark of the worst that marks a person, and with this remark the necessity of interpretation and hence misinterpretation--discreetly and absolutely displaces the reference of truth in reference to which the moral would place the obligation of being true. It displaces the reference of truth by the undecidable stroke that cuts through the would-be unity of action in the action of showing freely, the action of being true.

The displacement is enforced by the tension between the semantic content of the moral and its syntactic arrangement. As a command, the imperative--"Be true. . . . Show freely . . ."--can designate a moral necessity only insofar as its grammatical subject--an implied "you": the

characters in the text, the reader of The Scarlet Letter, the novel's speaker--is not bound by this necessity. Only if a person is free to be false can that person be free to be true. The necessity indicated by the imperative syntax is a non-necessity, a kind of necessity without necessity.

If the syntax cuts across the semantic content of the imperative, the semantic content divides the imperative syntax. The moral demand, because it is an appeal in the name of a responsibility grounded in freedom, in some sense pleads its demand. A demand that is pleaded, however, is no longer a demand, or it is a demand without demand. As such, the oxymoronic sentence becomes the so-called "hortatory imperative."

In either case, the moral withdraws from itself. One could say it differs from itself. It also delays itself. The introduction of the inferential structure of the trait as the non-presenting means of making present postpones both the action of making present and the very possibility of ever coming to a final moment of presentation, that is, of ever leaving the circuit of traits finally to reach an outside-the-trait (which, according to the logic of The Scarlet Letter, would be the outside-of-the-text). The moral effects the deferral of its reference most notably by displacing the object of the predicate from one signifier--"your worst" is at the outset not the thing itself but the name for the category of the infinite number of referents that the category subsumes--to another signifier, to a signifier of a signifier, in fact to a category of signifiers of another category of signifiers. Since the category of possible traits can include any and all signs in any and all their possible combinations, the trait category extends to the

limits of all sign systems. If in the trait logic of The Scarlet Letter all signs can be assimilated to the trait, and if the trait is so constituted as to displace truth and reference, then, The Scarlet Letter implies, all systems of signs will also displace truth and reference. The moral, then, defers itself. It still refers, but by delaying its reference, just as it still refers, but by differing from its reference. The differing and deferral of reference, the remarking of the mimetic frame of reference, would be the differance of mimesis. It would be the amimesis of mimesis where the a- is understood not as the privative, not as a simple negation, but as the remarked and remarking trait of disruption, the scarlet letter itself.

The differance of truth affects its mimetic authority. The narrative voice appeals to authority and its supposed retrievable source in the first person witness in order to establish the context from which the moral--"Be true"--pressures the narrator to draw it. "The authority," the narrator says, "which we have chiefly followed--a manuscript of old date, drawn up from the verbal testimony of individuals, some of whom had known Hester Prynne, while others had heard the tale from contemporary witnesses--fully confirms the view taken in the foregoing pages" (SL, 182). "The view": it is not possible to determine what "the view" is, since the "foregoing pages" have recorded two mutually exclusive views of Dimmesdale's confession. On the one hand, "most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER--the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne --imprinted in the flesh" (SL, 182). On the other hand, "it is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from

the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's" (SL, 182). The view in question, then, seems to be not singular but multiple. And yet the narrative voice insists on the singular view--despite its nonsingularity--as the authorized view. This view is confirmed by authority, the authority of "a manuscript of old date," whose textual accuracy the narrator does not question but rather asserts. Having asserted the authority of the manuscript that is then appealed to as confirmation of the narrative at hand, then and only then does the narrator put into a sentence the one moral from among the many "which press upon us." In short, the narrator responds to the pressure of the one moral among many by trying to establish the authority for a singular view that is not singular.

However, the narrator's efforts in fact undermine the identity, the singularity, of this authority, for this authority differs from and defers itself. First, the narrative "chiefly" follows the manuscript, as if there might have been interpolations, deletions, or other unspecified editorializing, the nature of which will remain outside the narrative purview. Second, the manuscript is of old date and thus subject to all manner of difficulty in restoring certain of its intentions. Third, the manuscript is not a legal copy or otherwise notarized transcript of verbal testimony but a document "drawn up from" certain verbal testimony, drawn up with a mimetic fidelity which remains unknown and certainly undemonstrated. Fourth, some of the testifying individuals "had known" Hester Prynne, but the nature, circumstances, reliability, and motivation of their knowledge remains an open question. And fifth, the testimony of others is merely second hand, the original "contemporary

witnesses" being unnamed and unknown and the credibility of their testimony being a matter the narrator does not raise. Clearly, the authority in question is a questionable authority. It is an authority that differs from and defers itself by virtue of the way each successive generation in (as well as each generation of) its lineage carries a potential qualification that refers one to a yet earlier and yet again qualified source for the authority. This authority, then, remains ungrounded, or grounded in a genealogy that compromises its authority. To the extent that it is questionable, it is an authority without authority. The rhetorical retracing of its constitution indicates the deconstituting movement that cuts across it in its constitution. This retracing, which is not something that happens to a referent that then becomes remarked but is a retracing that already inhabits the referent from the "outset," this retracing is to establish the undecidable stroke that undercuts the referent and its authority.

How can such a remarked authority "confirm," let alone "fully confirm," a view that, in its apparent (self)authorization, rewritten from the plural to the singular? It cannot, at least not without drawing such confirmation into the problematic of the remark. In fact, such confirmation has already been remarked in the series of revelations without revelations that compromise all the actions associated with showing, including, here, the action of confirming. Confirmation is not able to function, and in retrospect has never have been able to function at anytime in the text, as the mark of assurance. Each of the two terms, "authority" and "view," displaces itself; the two terms together disperse the predicate from across the difference between subject and object that the predicate would bridge. Framed by two remarked terms,

the predicate comes to govern an object (the view) that could not be established, let alone as having originated in an authorized source. As a result, "the authority" cannot be said to "fully confirm" "the view" that, because it cannot be determined to be the singular view it is named, and because it cannot be confirmed by an authority that has been disconfirmed by the rhetorical means, the rhetorical tracing of its genealogy, that would confirm it. The subject, predicate, and object here no longer describe a classical syntax which would perform an act of reference. To the contrary, they render this reference, and not just the particular referent but the very grammatical form of reference, untenable.

This disturbed reference is followed by the disturbed reference of the one moral from among the many that press upon the narrator, but not before the narrating voice marks itself, signs itself if you will. Having asserted its written authority, the voice puts its imprimatur on the one moral. What is this imprimatur? Not the first person singular --I, me--but the first person plural--we, us. The moral possibilities "press upon us." This manner of self-reference, although it may be dismissed as merely rhetorical, nevertheless reduplicates in reverse the equivocation of the singular view that is plural and introduces the moral (the one among the many) that has already been shown to be absolutely divided and incommensurable with itself and hence multiple.

Us: does the narrating voice speak as the individual representative for a collectivity, as one for many, or as the collectivity itself, as a kind of chorus, as a kind of collective singular identity superordinate to the subordinate identities of each of its singular members? Either way, the first person plural pronoun divides the grammatical identity of

the narrating voice and does so at the moment that that voice rhetorically unites the divided views of Dimmesdale's confession into a single view. Since "the view" is, according to the narrator, what the narration has presented in its "foregoing pages," the divided view divides the page or pages of narration. In relation to that division, the narrative voice emerges within the text--not from or out of the text to a position outside the story but within the text to a position that remains within the story--as one voice among the many that the narration is capable of presenting but does not, in fact, present. When this voice speaks or writes (itself) in the plural, it overwrites, so to say, what it has denied, namely the multiplicity of views and hence the multiplicity of its (repressed) voices. Thus, the voice immediately oscillates between the singular and the plural. It becomes a kind of plural singular or single plurality. As such, it ties its identity to what loosens its identity, namely an undecidable reference, an undecidable truth, an undecidable mimesis. The assimilation of one and many into the singular plural of us redoubles the split form of the moral as one among many.

If truth is reference--"reference itself," Derrida writes--then in remarking its truth The Scarlet Letter remarks the referential basis on which the novel traditionally has been read. Remarkd in the text, truth is dislodged from the position it occupies in traditional readings outside the text as the text's frame of reference. The same applies to all the terms associated with truth, especially its various predica-tions: showing, revealing, manifesting, appearing, and so on. Indeed, once truth has been rewritten as a non-showing showing, all perception becomes undecidable, as does every action undertaken in the name of

truth's authority, including the actions of narrating and authoring and proclaiming the truth.

We have seen how this affects the novel's readability. When one reads a text that at certain points withdraws the classical ground of reading, that challenges the reader to take on the promise and demand of the truth which every one of the text's traits removes, that authenticates itself by means of an authority whose difference from and deferral of itself disauthenticates itself, under these textual conditions one is no longer reading through the text to the world. One is no longer reading mimetically.

If The Scarlet Letter displaces reference, how can any apparent reference within the text be read?

The Signature of the Text

The Scarlet Letter's amimesis prevents a movement beyond the text by taking on the function of the signature. "The signature," according to Leavey, "rethinks the regulation of the referent, the manners in which the text refers to the one who signs, who takes responsibility for the text, and finally to the text itself within the general text" (1988, forthcoming).

In Signsponge, Derrida distinguishes three modalities of the signature. The first "represents the proper name" (52) authenticated by the one who signs: "here is my name, I refer to myself, named as I am, and I do so, therefore in my name. I, the undersigned, I affirm (yes, on my honor)" (54). In the Norton reproduction of The Scarlet Letter, as in most books, this modality of the signature is mimed on the front cover and title page where Hawthorne's name rather than his handwritten signature, his holograph, is reproduced in typeface.

The second modality refers to "the style, the inimitable idiom" of the signer. Here, the signature "is the set of idiomatic marks that a signer might leave by accident or intention in his product" (54). Much of the criticism of Hawthorne could be summarized as the attempt to
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 characterize the particular stamp of his writing.

The third modality of the signature, Derrida says, "we may designate as general signature, or signature of the signature, the fold of the placement in abyss where, after the manner of the signature in the current sense, the work of writing designates, describes, and inscribes itself as act (action and archive), signs itself before the end by affording us the opportunity to read: I refer to myself, this is writing, I am a writing, this is writing . . ." (54). This textual signature blocks the would-be exit from the text, the would-be entrance to an outside the text. Perhaps like Kafka's doorkeeper, this signature of signature stands in the way of either entering or leaving the text. Can a text sign itself? In the mimetic tradition, this possibility does not arise. The author signs, the reader signs, the interpretive community signs, sometimes the world or consciousness signs, but the text, its textuality, is not understood as signing. In the criticism on the The Scarlet Letter, as we have seen, the effort typically has been made to determine the romance's single or multiple or ambiguous meaning as a pattern of authorial artistry signed (in the second modality) by Hawthorne and countersigned by the critic, both in the name of truth, however doubtful.

For Edgar Dryden, for example, Hawthorne's corpus constitutes a kind of signature-memorial. His works are imprinted with his characteristic "thematic self, a self that may be defined simply as the organiz-

ing principle or conceptual center of his work" (11). This principle, for Dryden, effectively reproduces the writer's self-history, his or her autobiography. "My primary concern has been to uncover the similarities among all the works and to identify the unvarying patterns throughout Hawthorne's career as a writer" (11). Hawthorne, Dryden believes, would have approved. In any case, Dryden approves of Hawthorne's view--Dryden countersigns it--"that a writer's development often takes the form of a gradual coming-to-awareness of the hidden truths that have been central to his work from the beginning" (11-12). Thus, autobiographical self merges with authorial self, and this makes of the work a monumentalized signature of Hawthorne the man: "Hawthorne, in short, is a man whose central and repeated experience is one of exile and dispersion from a number of temporary homes; and that experience, moreover, is centrally related to his career as a writer" (147). Dryden relates Hawthorne's "homelessness" to its dialectical antithesis, homecoming. The two moments bring art and life together under the aegis of enchantment-disenchantment:

"The Custom House" then, is both an account of Hawthorne's rootless life and, at the same time, as an "entrance-hall to the magnificent edifice [The Scarlet Letter] which he throw[s] open to [his] guest," is the record of a homecoming. In this sense the sketch endows the familiar house-of-fiction metaphor with an important ontological dimension, for it suggests that Hawthorne has been able to find a place to rest from his "world wanderings" in that house of words which he erects between himself and "this transitory world [which] is not our home." (148-49; first brackets mine)

At the end of his career, Dryden argues, Hawthorne equated the image of an Ancestral Home with, on the one hand, an empty dream and, on the other hand, the "atmosphere of romance" and the "enterprise of the romancer" (10). Hawthorne "comes to see that fiction is no more than a

symptom of the condition it at once laments and seeks to overcome": homelessness in particular and more generally "the distance between the self and the other" and the "polarities that constitute for him the matrix of human relationships" (171). At the end, fiction for Hawthorne, according to Dryden, disenchant; it demystifies its own enchantment with enchantment and so brings Hawthorne to the end of his career, his work now preserving the double-bind of his signature: when Hawthorne signs off, he signs and unsigns in the same gesture. He continues to sign in discontinuing to sign as he has all along been developing toward the discontinuous end of his continuous signature. He signs off signing.

Dryden's view of Hawthorne repeats a certain Freudian view of the artist as daydreamer and the reading of fiction as a temporary escape from reality. The "spell cast over us by the fictive world" is "an enchantment as mystifying as the games of childhood; and as long as we breathe the hallucinating atmosphere of this world, which is after all no more than black marks on a page, we lose our sense of our own realities and give ourselves over to a realm that does not exist" (13-14). The price of this enchantment, Dryden believes, is the cost of a disenchanting return to reality:

if fictions resemble the games of childhood, they recall too those experiences most often associated with the loss of childhood innocence. While some fictions are longer than others . . . all must end sooner or later and with that end comes disenchantment in the form of a sense of loss. (14)

In this view, again, the split signature of Hawthorne is Hawthorne's disenchanted attempt to stop enchantment. It is his attempt to move the signature from inside the text (here reduced to a psychic fantasm) to

outside the text where identity is reconstituted, along with the signature, in relation to adult experience.

Two problems. First, Dryden demonstrates how, in the Ancestral Home Fragments, Hawthorne's autobiographical persona, Clifton, comes to recognize that the romance of his life has ended and that its real history has commenced," and how, "for Hawthorne, however, that experience records the end rather than the beginning of a writing career, for it signifies the end of story as he understands it" (172). This account of Dryden's takes the form of "an inside narrative" in the first sentence of the paragraph that then describes fiction as a world of enchantment, hallucination, and nonexistence whose inevitable end at the end of reading inevitably disenchantments by producing a sense of loss.

Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Poetics of Enchantment tries to sustain the enchantment of Hawthorne's works by converting Hawthorne's disenchantment into part of the larger story, the "inside narrative" that in coming to its end does not allow Hawthorne's disenchantment, "the end of story as he understands it," to be the end of story which Dryden has already marked as inevitable. In short, Hawthorne has already signed Dryden's critical romance in signing off signing his own.

Second problem: The disenchanted adult identity Hawthorne comes to already has been thematized in his works where the dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment doubles the dialectic of isolation and communion. The enchantment of isolation, Dryden says, "is a form of hallucination subject to the disenchanting pull of desire" (33) for communion. When one of Hawthorne's characters suddenly sees "the act of distancing . . . as a disruption between man and total reality, a disruption which deprives him of the life-giving warmth of other people" (34), this

character may make a move toward involvement or reinvolverment with others. "But a return to the world would only momentarily revitalize. As Hawthorne's custom house experience indicates, involvement with others generates a desire for solitude with the same insistency that solitude creates a longing for others" (35). Dryden continues:

On the one hand a dread of becoming wholly substance; on the other a fear of being nothing but shadow; linking both the power of the other. Here is the creative source of Hawthorne's imagery: an unappeasable desire, the experience of fulfillment of which is necessarily illusory and temporary and which therefore produces an alternating movement from enchantment to disenchantment and back again.
(35)

If this desire produces the alternating movement of enchantment and disenchantment, it has in turn already been produced by this movement. The terms of Dryden's definition of fulfillment--"necessarily illusory and temporary"--reproduce the terms of his definition of enchantment. Disenchantment, the movement out of enchantment, however, takes place in Hawthorne's world as part of the dialectic of his fiction. That fiction, Dryden wants to argue, is the movement of enchantment which Hawthorne's disenchantment takes him out of. However, once the fiction is read as thematizing the supposed pattern of the author's life, it becomes impossible to determine that life as the outside-text. The text (the corpus) remarks the notion of a disenchanted movement outside the fiction as the fictive story, as a movement of the "hallucinatory" "fictive world" of "enchantment." As a consequence, the movement outside the text within the text defers and divides what Dryden calls Hawthorne's understanding of the ending of story. In terms of the signature, the story has signed "Hawthorne" in advance of being signed by him.

This is another way of saying that the authorial signature is textually in abyss. The text stages the impossibility of the authorial signature to assign the text to the responsibility of someone who would be outside the text. This staging is one of the text's many textual signatures by which it fragments reference, here the entire system of reference Dryden sets up between fiction and reality, isolation and community, enchantment and disenchantment, with the second term of each pair purportedly grounding and dominating the first.

In Glas, Derrida asks the general question, "what remains of a signature?" There are, he says, two possibilities:

First case: the signature belongs to the inside of that (picture, relieve, discourse, and so on) which it is presumed to sign. It is in the text, no longer signs, operates as an effect within the object, plays as a piece in what it claims to appropriate or to lead back to its origin. The filiation is lost. The seing [signature] is defalcated. (4b; my brackets)

Belonging to the inside, the signature is an element of the text. In Dryden's "inside narrative" of "Hawthorne" (the construct he equates with Hawthorne), any appearance of Hawthorne's signature in the text would have to be an enchanted signature, spell-bound, hallucinating, illusory, delusive, fictive. Finally, this signature, along with the romance, could only come to an end. Belonging to the text, Hawthorne's signature will be a disappointing signature, disenchanting. Inside the text, Hawthorne's signature will partake of the two moments, enchantment and disenchantment, that split the signature from its reference to an outside and scatter the signature throughout the text.

Second case: the signature holds itself, as is generally believed, outside the text. The signature emancipates as well the product that dispenses with the signature, with the name of the father or of the mother the product no longer needs to function. The

filiation gives itself up, is betrayed by what remarks it. (4b)

Outside the text, the signature remains inessential to it. Erase this supposedly outside signature, obliterate it, render it anonymous, and the text remains. We have already seen, however, in tracing out the implications of Dryden's interpretation of Hawthorne, that Hawthorne's corpus denies the possibility of such an outside since this outside the text can only take place within the text as the already fictive disenchantment of the movement outside; that is, the outside can take place only as one of Hawthorne's fiction's constituting aspects. Outside the text, Hawthorne's signature already belongs to the inside as an effect within the fictional object, as a name for the movement into fiction in the movement out of fiction, as the name for the loss of the loss of innocence (Dryden defines disenchantment or experience as the consequence of the loss of experience) in the loss of experience. The signature, traditionally the guarantee of the text's filiation, of its authorial inheritance, is split off from this seminal function in the amimetic dissemination of the general signature.

Before returning to the moral of The Scarlet Letter to consider how it serves to disseminate the general signature, I want to examine how two other critics have attempted to trace The Scarlet Letter back to its inception in an inseminating authorial signature located in "The Custom-House" introductory.

In "The Custom-House," the first two modalities of the signature overlap. In terms of the second modality, Hawthorne continuously signs what has traditionally been read as an autobiographical introduction, and he highlights this continuous stylistic signature in the famous passage describing the scene of romance-writing (see SL, 30-31), which

has often been taken to prefigure certain scenes within The Scarlet Letter, if not The Scarlet Letter in its entirety. In terms of the first modality, the entire "Custom-House" essay itself constitutes an extended signature and the paraph of this signature affixed to The Scarlet Letter. As a presumptively autobiographical sketch, "The Custom-House" documents the writing of the romance in terms of the author's life. In terms of the second modality, this sketch produces a literary identity simultaneous with the production of the romance.

In point of fact, as John T. Irwin and Evan Carton, among others, have indicated, in "The Custom-House" Hawthorne (without quotation marks for them) attempts to reconceive himself in his own name and image, to rebeget himself as his own father. The Scarlet Letter will be his offspring. As Pearl will be the scarlet letter endowed with life, so, too, The Scarlet Letter would be Hawthorne's signature analogously alive, transporting Nathaniel Hawthorne into the future beyond his death. Like Pearl, however, whose life is inscribed in a text, I would argue against Carton and Irwin that The Scarlet Letter will be the textual inscription of a life that no signature, not even a putative self-creating one, will be able to take to an outside of the text. At the end of "The Custom-House," Hawthorne underscores his project of self-creation as the passage from life to literature: "The real human being . . . was again a literary man" (SL, 36). This passage, I believe, cannot occur in this fictionalized manner, since the real human being is always already textualized.

For Evan Carton, "'The Custom-House' narrates the genesis and development of the autobiographical subject who addresses the reader in its opening paragraphs" (155). Written after The Scarlet Letter, it

frames the romance with the fundamental authorial prerogative in the classical tradition: "Hawthorne's production of The Scarlet Letter, his first 'romance,' is his production of a personal identity," one that would answer to "the want of an original relation to the universe . . ." (153). The success of this enterprise, Carton says, depends on Hawthorne's ability to work through his relation to his past, specifically to his image of his Puritan male ancestors whom he symbolically reincarnates in the figures of the custom house officers with whom he worked during his short-lived political appointment there. Thus, "The Custom-House" records Hawthorne's "frankly Oedipal quest to generate a future by retrieving one's own origins, to win identity and authority by taking upon oneself the father's office" (Carton, 157). In this sense, Hawthorne proffers his signature as a self-guarantee, that is, as the authenticating mark not just of his romance but of himself. However, if his identity is achieved through the production of The Scarlet Letter, The Scarlet Letter will sign Nathaniel Hawthorne as much as it will be his signature.

Irwin has examined in detail the oedipal dynamic of Hawthorne's quest to resurrect himself as a writer. In Irwin's analysis, Hawthorne's quest entails a rhetorical strategy of reversal by which he becomes the father of his fathers, his ancestors' ancestor, but also his own surviving heir, the living on of his consciousness after his death. To this end, in "The Custom-House" Hawthorne first effects "the reversal of masculine and feminine traits (whereby the supposedly passive artist is shown to be more truly active than the men of customary business) . . ." (Irwin, 274). This reversal enables him, as an already established author of children's books, to treat his patriarchal custom house

associates (retired sea captains as were his father and grandfather, Irwin notes) as "helpless, frightened children" (275). In "The Custom-House" sketch, Hawthorne assumes the paternal office by infantilizing the men who stand in for his ancestors. If the passing of the oedipus complex occurs for the male child when he identifies with the father, here is Hawthorne's identification with a vengeance.

In fact, such identification perpetuates rather than resolves the oedipal conflict of child (here son) against parent (here father). Again according to Irwin:

Manliness is a recurring concern in "The Custom-House" precisely because the imagined patriarchal censure of the author seems to raise the question of whether masculinity is compatible with the role of the artist. Hawthorne's response is an elaborate trope in which manliness is shown to reside in the son's resistance to the father's will rather than in his continued residence in the patriarchal "custom" house. (276)

The nature of this resistance centers on the fiction of Jonathan Pue and his manuscript. This now dead surveyor-cum-author "is Hawthorne's own mirror-image--the figure of a surveyor who can write confronting a writer who has become a surveyor--a daemon who makes Hawthorne see what he is and what he has become" (277). The dead Mr. Pue reflects Hawthorne's own ghostly presence in the custom house and provides Hawthorne with a spectral image of the self-resurrection he will attempt in the writing of The Scarlet Letter. To resurrect himself, Irwin says, "his public self must die so that his writing self can be reborn" (278). But Hawthorne makes sure, in a rhetorical move worthy of one of Bloom's strong poets, not only that his writing self issues from his public death, but that his public death stands for the death that inhabits the

public lives of all who work at the custom house. The custom house is a house of the dead, a sarcophagus.

The rhetorical move is to associate his expulsion from his custom house office, upon the election of Taylor to the presidency in 1848, with a symbolic decapitation and its overtones of castration. The move is apotropaic: it wards off the threat of (imaginative or literary) impotence and castration associated with the custom house through a partial realization of the threat. The decapitation-castration by which Hawthorne is removed from his office thus decapitates and castrates the decapitation-castration of the custom house life.

The apotrope of decapitation clears the way for Hawthorne's resurrection against his forefathers. This resurrection takes place in terms of the apocalypse of memory. Hawthorne places himself at the gates of culture's memory, "implying that a community has a long-term memory only because of the mnemonic inscriptions of its writers" (184), Irwin says of Hawthorne's farewell address to the custom house at the end of the introductory essay. Irwin then cites from the penultimate paragraph of "The Custom-House" where Hawthorne reduces the life and people of the custom house to a "dream," "shadows in my view," "white-headed and wrinkled images, which my fancy used to sport with, and has now flung aside for ever" (SL, 37). Hawthorne continues to evoke the life of the custom house world as the passing out of life into memory, that is, as a sort of mnemonic decapitation:

Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory, a mist brooding over and around it; as if it were no portion of the real earth, but an overgrown village in cloudland, with only imaginary inhabitants to people its wooden houses. . . . Henceforth, it ceases to be a reality of my life. (SL, 37)

The moment of judgment at hand, Hawthorne determines the fate of his town and associates. Their existence will be as shadows of his imagination. Their survival will occur only as he activates his memory, even if only to remember to forget them. As Irwin notes:

this reduction of the townspeople to the status of mnemically inscribed images . . . is in effect an apotheosis of the author's imagination, for it makes the townspeople's survival dependent upon their persistence in the author's godlike memory, in his book of life. (284)

The apotheosis of Hawthorne's imagination, then, occurs as the apocalypse of memory, memory's ability to predicate the withdrawal from memory of what memory remembers. The end of the custom house personages coincides with Hawthorne's imagination's ability to remember and forget them in the same psychic act, to incorporate them into while ejecting them from his life.

For the apotheosis to be complete, however, the imagination must stage its own survival against just such an act of apocalyptic memoratation that it has performed against its ancestors. Imagination must, that is, stage its future remembrance against the possibility of being forgotten by its successors; it must appropriate the memory of the future.

Is this Hawthorne's desire? Irwin would answer yes. Hawthorne's expression of this desire constitutes his anticipation of a triumph over the future as he has imagined a corresponding triumph over the past. Here is his apostrophe to himself:

It may be, however,--O transporting and triumphant thought!--that the great-grandchildren of the present race may sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days, when the antiquary of days to come, among the sites memorable in the town's

history, shall point out the locality of The Town Pump. (SL, 37)

Here is Irwin's gloss on this passage:

Referring to his sketch 'A Rill from the Town Pump' . . . [and] humorously imagining himself as an original, as a living source in their midst (the town pump), Hawthorne obliquely expresses his desire that the book [The Scarlet Letter] . . . will perpetuate him from generation to generation, will be a "living hieroglyphic," its meaning and destiny as vitally indeterminate as his own. (284)

Hawthorne has earlier staged a negative version of the father surviving his children only to meet with a kind of symbolic decapitation in Hawthorne's unremitting denigration of this man. "The father of the Custom-House--the patriarch, not only of this little squad of officials, but, I am bold to say, of the respectable body of tide-waiters all over the United States . . ." (SL, 16), this inspector "had been the husband of three wives, all long since dead; the father of twenty children, most of whom, at every age of childhood or maturity, had likewise returned to dust" (SL, 17). Hawthorne allows himself to remember this man, perhaps as a negative reminder of how others might remember him: "He was, in truth, a rare phenomenon; so perfect in one point of view; so shallow, so delusive, so impalpable, such an absolute nonentity, in every other. My conclusion was that he had no soul, no heart, no mind; nothing . . . but instincts . . ." (SL, 17). It is not enough to be remembered; one must be able to control how one is remembered. Otherwise, as Hawthorne himself does with respect to the inspector and others, the future's memory can consign one to a kind of perpetual, ongoing, living oblivion as a remembered-only-to-be-forgotten nonentity.

So Hawthorne--at least as Irwin, Carton, and others interpret the voice of "The Custom-House"--must protect himself against such a fate by

remembering himself into the future as one who survives the obliterating memories of others. Does he do this? Again, Irwin says yes.

Near the end of "The Custom-House," Hawthorne says that he had originally intended to publish the tale of the scarlet letter as part of a larger book. Having thus characterized the book as a partial object, he immediately links it to the motif of symbolic decapitation/castration: "Keeping up the metaphor of the political guillotine, the whole may be considered as the Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor; and so the sketch which I am now bringing to a close, if too autobiographical for a modest person to publish in his lifetime, will readily be excused in a gentleman who writes from beyond the grave. Peace be with all the world! My blessing on my friends! My forgiveness to my enemies! For I am in the realm of the quiet" [SL, 36-37]. (Irwin, 284; my brackets)

Hawthorne places himself in "The Custom-House" essay as if he were a dead man, so that when he writes, he writes "from beyond the grave." Is this possible? Or is it, rather, a fantastic conceit? According to Irwin:

What was only the author's figurative death at the time Hawthorne wrote became within fifteen years of the book's publication a real death, so that present readers experience this passage as literally addressed "from beyond the grave," as the cryptic figure on the stone. Yet it is precisely by this prefiguration that Hawthorne subtly points to the written survival of his own consciousness in that very passage, in that act of imagining and inscribing his own death in advance as if it were written from beyond the grave. (284)

How does Irwin determine this spectral writing? Not as writing, but as consciousness, the survival of Hawthorne incarnate in the "written survival of his own consciousness." Thus, Hawthorne returns from the dead to live again, to sign again and again, to turn every reading of The Scarlet Letter and its "Custom-House" introduction into a celebration of himself.

Unless, of course, one were to put "Hawthorne" within quotation marks, precisely what almost no one seems to want to do. For that would immediately sever the text from its author, from the one who would sign the text with its controlling hand. And thus would sever the text from the possibility of incarnating consciousness as its source (which would be demoted to the status of, perhaps, a resource within the text).

We can now appreciate the signature in its first two modalities as the attempt to sign in the apotropaic and apocalyptic name of, for example, individual survival, individual consciousness, individual identity; in the name of mimesis, if you will, or of a referentiality that leads from text to outside-text. Apotropaic because the name serves to ward off death. Apocalyptic because the name reveals the threatening scene of the end that the signature is to overcome. At least in the classical understanding of the signature as either the mark of the proper name or the inimitable idiom of the signer. In effect, Irwin determines Hawthorne's idiom as the means of preserving, sustaining, rebegetting, propagating Hawthorne's proper name. Thus, The Scarlet Letter merely fulfills the prophecy of "The Custom-House," that it has been sent by one who writes from beyond the grave. The Scarlet Letter will be Hawthorne's living signature, replicated throughout futurity. Or his monument, the monument to his particular--now canonized--consciousness. A formidable authorial self-defense, an impregnable signature pregnant only with itself, giving birth to itself into the text again and again.

Derrida has said that the text does not depend on the signature, whether the signature occurs "within" the text or "outside" the text. As Leavey has explained, "in the first case the signature entombs itself

within the text; in the second case the signature entombs itself outside the text. In both cases, the signature loses filiation" (1986, 82a). The threat of lost filiation, however, activates what, following Leavey, could be called an "apotropocalyptic" defense, the attempt to entomb the text, encase it in the signature so as to ward off what the text discloses, that it does without the signature, that its filiation is always already lost (see Leavey, 1986, 127ab). It is lost in its placement in abyss of the general signature.

The third modality of the signature interrupts the classical signature. It disperses its claim to authorship. It announces that this is a text and that its reference is only back to itself. It refuses the gesture outside, the gesture, for example, of truth or of consciousness.

I have suggested in passing how the moral of The Scarlet Letter is removed from any source in a human subject. No character speaks the moral, and the narrating voice (that may or may not be a character, and that may or may not be the same voice as the voice of "The Custom-House") merely cites it under a kind of compulsion, responding to the force the text's moral exerts in pressing upon "us," its singular-plural voice. The moral does not refer its content back to any speaker: it speaks, or rather it writes, itself. In so doing, it mimes the truth with two convergent consequences.

First consequence. The moral mimes itself. Who has the authority to announce a universal? Who, what individual, can stand in the place of truth and speak its necessity? If truth is a universal, how could any individual possibly sign it? Hegel understood the necessity of excluding the philosopher's signature. According to Leavey, "in The Ear of the Other, Derrida says that Hegel's signature was hard to read,

that Hegel wanted it to be illegible, subtracted from the system to show the system's 'truth' and 'autonomy'" (Leavey, 1988, forthcoming).

Leavey then cites from The Ear of the Other:

Hegel presents himself as a philosopher or a thinker, someone who constantly tells you that his empirical signature--the signature of the individual named Hegel--is secondary. His signature, that is, pales in the face of truth, which speaks through his mouth, which is produced in his text, which constructs the system it constructs. This system is the teleological outcome of all of Western experience, so that in the end Hegel, the individual, is nothing but an empiric shell which can fall away without subtracting from the truth or from the history of meaning. (Derrida, 1985, 56)

In fact, Derrida says, such a falling away "is even necessary in his [Hegel's] own system because it will prove the truth and the autonomy of that system. Thus, my exclusion from what I am saying--the exclusion of my signature from the text produced through me--is absolutely essential and necessary if my discourse is to be a philosophical, ontological one" (Derrida, 1985, 56). When The Scarlet Letter removes the moral, when the moral removes itself, from the one who would sign it, when The Scarlet Letter removes the signature, it mimes the philosophical text. The moral says that truth is speaking through the text: Truth speaks; and truth says, in truth, be true. In speaking through the text, truth dispenses with "Hawthorne" as it does with everyone who would sign in the name of truth. The moral thus overtakes the mimetic reading on mimesis's own terms. It overtakes the signature and the supposed border between text and outside-text. If the moral is true, if the moral shows freely, then it performs the mimesis it invokes: it mimes mimesis.

Second consequence: This miming, however, is also a mimicry or an echolalia. Who says "Be true!" and what does "Be true!" say? The phrase, "Be true," repeats three times. In the traditional reading, it

communicates the same urgent message three times over. Repetition, here, is "full": a message is repeated to make sure it is received. Since a message can be degraded in its transmission, since a signal can be lost for any number of reasons, its repetition is to insure its integrity against any possible disruptions that may befall it. But its repetition may work otherwise. Within the series of "Be true's," each phrase repeats, cites, echoes, or mimics the others. From the first, the "first" instance of "Be true" bears the possibility of being a citation of what "later" is said. The "first" already bears the possibility of being "second" or "third," already of being a (first) repetition. In this case, the words do not say something--they do not communicate a content or meaning--they say their saying in a parody of their saying that truth says, in truth, be true. There is, then, no saying of the words, "Be true," that is not already caught up in a citational loop that prevents the words from decidably referring beyond their own echoing echo.

The moral mimics truth's mimesis. Once again, it overtakes the mimetic reading and its wish to have the text signed--usually by Hawthorne--in the name of truth. It also overtakes the mimetic signature in the signature of the signature.

To sign in the name of truth, the maxim says, will be to show one's worst. The text demands (of no one in particular, it should be noted, only of a generalized you that could just as well refer back to the maxim itself as to someone "outside" it) that one show oneself, declare oneself, identify oneself in one's worst. The maxim imposes "the worst" as the general form of the signature for everyone: show your worst, it

shall be your signature, your access to the truth by which you sign yourself, in truth, as the one you claim to be.

We have already seen, however, that truth, showing freely, and the worst do not occur as such. Each differs from and defers itself, supplements itself, remarks itself or is reworked in a dissemination of mimesis. Thus, the name of truth is mimed by the trait; conversely, the textual maxim shows truth's mimicry of itself in the trait. Hence the trait doubles and divides every attempt to sign by showing the worst. The worst always manages to disappear in appearing and to appear in disappearing.

If the demand to show freely the worst can be understood as the demand to sign and as the general formula for the signature, then the textual maxim would be the signature of signature and would place itself in the abyss of its own showing that is the best showing of its worst showing.

Such a general signature stages the problem of signing throughout The Scarlet Letter and implicates ever proper name in the problem of the trait and the way it renders the name improper. More generally, the signature of the text articulates the problem of allegory as Ralph Flores has outlined it with respect to The Scarlet Letter.

In "Ungrounding Allegory: The Dead-Living Letter in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter," Flores argues that the romance thematizes the movement of allegorization; it stages its own reading of itself as allegory. More specifically, it allegorizes its allegorical possibilities to the effect that it "fails to offer any ground for didactic statements about it or about 'life' in general" (313-14). That is, it calls attention to itself as text or textuality and refuses the referential movement out-

side the text of an allegorizing mimesis of "life." The ungrounding of its own allegorization is, I will argue, akin to an abyss, the folding of the text over itself in the general signature: "the allegory of The Scarlet Letter not only is groundless but is used for an undoing both of its thematic assessment and of the usual assumptions of traditional allegory" (Flores, 314). The Scarlet Letter, in Flores's argument, says: this text is allegory without its referent, this text suspends its allegory in its allegorizing. In so doing, Flores argues, it suspends the opposition of life-death: "the text is marked . . . by allegorical personifications whose assertions of life are problematically entangled with death, dying, and deadness" (316). Following Flores's lead, I want to reexamine several of the entanglements he points out but do so in relation to the notion of signature.

As we have seen, the voice of "The Custom-House" allegorizes its career in terms of symbolic decapitation into life. The narrating voice of the introduction experiences, or writes as if "he" (as most critics have determined this voice) experiences, the "life" of the custom house as the suspension or loss or hiding of life. "Nature . . . was, in a sense, hidden from me; and all the imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of my mind. A gift, a faculty, if it had not departed, was suspended and inanimate within me" (SL, 23). Such a life threatens the narrator's identity: "It might be true, indeed, that this was a life which could not, with impunity, be lived too long; else it might make me permanently other than I had been . . ." (SL, 23). How does the narrating I sign here? It invokes the possibility of becoming "permanently other than what I had been" and signs against this possibility. But from which side of it? Does the narrat-

ing voice sign as "what I had been" or as temporarily other than what it has been? The text provides no answer: the narrating I is split between what it had been and what it permanently might become and is suspended within the split between the two. But being suspended within its own split, it splits its split and becomes a not-I I. In other words, this I without I simultaneously signs and unsigns. It signs twice in signing once, decapitating itself in a manner that fragments its referent or, to return to Flores's terms, that ungrounds its allegorical reference.

The I of "The Custom-House" signs itself again at the end of the introduction. I have already considered how, at that point, he inscribes the apotheosis of his imagination as the apocalypse of memory. The narrator evokes the memory of his living and dead custom house cohorts and reduces them, living and dead alike, to "shadows," "a dream," and finally to nonreality. If the world of the custom house "henceforth ceases to be a reality of my life," if the narrator "is a citizen of somewhere else" (SL, 37), where is the living and dead world of the custom house when the narrator, in the presumed reality of his present life elsewhere, remembers the custom house world as an unreal world not of his life? In what world is the narrator inhabiting when he declares himself a citizen of somewhere else than the unreal world he is recalling, in the elsewhere he now lives, in order to forget? From where does this narrator write? Which side of the line between life and death?

Once again, the answer is undecidable. The narrator's apotropaic memory wards off the death-in-life threat of the custom house only by keeping the death-threat alive. Thus the narrator signs--he announces his identity--in the name not of life but of the death he wishes to

avoid, a death that is possible within life and that prevents one from signing in life's name. How so? Because life is always already split within itself between life and death-in-life. Remember, only if death can inhabit life can the narrator remember the custom house life as a dying or as an unreality and activate his remembering-to-forget defense against it. The narrating I signs in the disruption of the difference between life and death, a disruption that doubles the disruption of the difference between memory and forgetting, I and not-I. The narrator signs as a trait of the romance's textuality.

So, too, does Hester Prynne, who, through her "elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes" (SL, 43), Flores says, "makes a text" in which the mark, the A, "becomes 'her' paraph" (320). Flores notes that, "like a rhetorical trope," Hester Prynne's elaborated letter "can be considered either as a mere decoration upon a basically untouched message or . . . a deviation and subversion of that message" (320). Thus, Flores asks, "is Hester following 'literally' the letter of the law or is she . . . (re-)writing the law? . . . Are the flourishes literal, since they are on, or of, the letter, or are they an interpretation?" (320). Does she admit her guilt and the rightness of the law, he wonders, or does she flaunt her guilt against the law? Flores concludes that

Hester's troping of the letter, then, is inconclusive, and therein may lie its ungrounding force. Her text in its very literality begins to subvert the literal/figurative distinction on which the clarity of her punishment as allegory is based (she, with her letter, "represents" the sin so marked), for what if anything the lavishly embellished letter indicates is that precisely the literality of the letter--what is ostensibly visible, immediate, readable--is also necessarily figurative, or obscure. (320)

Flores then suggests that "this situation plays into the peculiar groundless-ungrounding 'economy' of the text" (320). To which I would add that it is the "economy" of the trait. If Hester Prynne's embroidery is the paraph to the letter as signature, and if the letter is the trait of her worst, then the embroidered letter is the signature--or signature of signature--as trait.

Each character tries to reinscribe someone else's inscription of the signature-trait. Flores points out that the town fathers, for example, anxious about Pearl and what her life means for them, attempt to rename her "according to other allegories, as Coral or Ruby or Red Rose" (322). When Pearl is in the governor's mansion, she sees a red rose in the garden and cries out for it. Hester Prynne tries to hush her: "'I hear voices in the garden. The Governor is coming . . .'" (SL, 80). The editors of the Norton gloss this passage as an allusion to Genesis 2:16-17 and 3:6-8. Following the allusion to the forbidden fruit, symbolized by the red rose, and to "the voice of the Lord God walking in the Garden," Hester Prynne is interviewed by the church elders among whom the governor suggests that the mother of such a child as Pearl "'must needs be a scarlet woman, and a worthy type of her of Babylon'" (SL, 82). First Hester Prynne and then Arthur Dimmesdale will resist this allegorizing interpretation by recurring to the scene of Pearl's naming.

Hester Prynne names her daughter as an act of self-signature. "Her Pearl!--For so had Hester called her . . . as being of great price,--purchased with all she had,--her mother's only treasure!" (SL, 67). When she defends herself against the desire of the elders to have Pearl removed from her charge, she underscores her allegorical naming of her

child. "'Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?'" (SL84). When Dimmesdale seconds her defense, he does so in the name of truth that he mimes here as he does later.⁶ He sanctifies Pearl as the gift of God and so finesses the paternity he once again compromises.⁷ Putting his vocal imprimatur to Hester Prynne's defense, he, in fact, mimes her defense in an elaborate restatement of it from his position as a minister who hides the truth of his paternity behind the truth of what Hester says, which he endorses in the name of the truth he cannot bring himself to honor. He mimes the truth in miming the allegorical interpretation he presents, and so ungrounds the allegory. As Flores has noted about Dimmesdale's various public speeches, in them allegory "speaks as a double bind or double performance" (331). It is a performance that articulates the doubleness we have seen at work in the signature-trait.

Although the entire romance could be reread in terms of this articulation, I want to consider just one more instance. Each character in The Scarlet Letter attempts to sign and countersign, and every time the resulting signature is placed in what Flores calls "the peculiar groundless-ungrounding 'economy'" or self-subverting allegory of the text and what I am suggesting is an abyss. The textual maxim performs this placement as does the voice of "The Custom-House" in relation to one of The Scarlet Letter's trait, the A, the scarlet letter, hence The Scarlet Letter.

As embellisher of the A, Hester Prynne is a kind of editor. In any case, her relation to the A is similar to the relation of "The Custom-

House" narrator to the "affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded" (SL, 27) that he finds in the custom house attic. About this cloth, the narrator says: "There were traces about it of gold embroidery, which, however, was greatly frayed and defaced; so that none, or very little, of the glitter was left" (SL, 27). Flores comments:

Notice that much of what Hester Prynne had "added" to the letter has now, with time, been "frayed and defaced"; the narrator's act of writing reiterates approximately the supplementarity of Hester's texts, re-tropeing her inconclusively subversive tropes. Like her, the narrator is ambiguously a follower or subverter, an editor or embellisher: he "dress[es] up the tale, imagining . . . motives. . . ." (321)

He dresses up the tale, however, not in his own name but that of Pue and, furthermore, in the name of "showing freely": the "main facts" of the story of Hester Prynne "are authorized and authenticated"--doubly so!--"by the document of Mr. Surveyor Pue. The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself . . . are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever . . . may desire a sign of them" (SL, 28-29). He then admits that he has, in dressing up the tale, "allowed myself . . . nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline" (SL, 29). The contention, however, partakes of the rhetorical license he is justifying, for "The Custom-House" is, as an introduction, already an elaboration of the supposedly authentic outline that will be yet again embellished in the elaborated retelling of it that follows as The Scarlet Letter. The narrator unsigns Pue's authenticating signature in supposedly authenticating by countersigning it. Simultaneously, he loosens the "authenticity" of the tale's "outline" from any possible referent, including the "outline" of the A Hester Prynne embellishes with her needlework.

Flores interprets the two embroidery scenes as versions of an

"allegory of allegory":

Is the embellishment of the letter a bringing it to life, as was said of allegory for medieval Christians, giving the letter a coloration, a "fertility and gorgeous luxuriance" [SL, 43] in contrast to the unproductive Custom-House? If the narrator recopies the text of that allegory with his embellishments (like a medieval scribe) we can never be certain to what extent he does other than reiterate the heroine's gesture. For the text may indeed tell doubly (other than) what it tells, even about telling itself. (321)

This doubling is already doubled, however, for we also can never be certain to what extent Hester Prynne anything does other than reiterate the narrator's gesture, about which we can never be certain to what extent he does anything other than reiterate the heroine's gesture. The reiteration of one signature in another puts mimesis, allegorical or otherwise, in abyss: the scribal reiteration is undecided between an act of reproduction and an act of origination; the copy is split, as is the original. Between Hester Prynne and the narrator, there is no ground for deciding who copies whom. Each, in effect, cites the other, is a citation of the other, in the manner that the textual maxim, itself a citation, cites itself, in fact cites its citation in its echoing mimicry of the voice of truth. No wonder, then, that the narrating voice of The Scarlet Letter signs itself in an undecidable plural when recalling "the authority which we have chiefly followed . . ." (SL, 183).

In the "Conclusion" to The Scarlet Letter, the authority for The Scarlet Letter is again a document whose signatories now are the plural countersignatories of yet other countersignatories (the acquaintances of Hester Prynne, the hearsayers, the witnesses) and so on in an indeter-

minable regress. Once again, the reference to the manuscript and its authentication occurs within the text as a reference to what is outside the text. That is, the reference to what is outside the text names the supposed outside and thus draws it into the text as an element that is no longer simply outside.

Which signature event signs for The Scarlet Letter? Both claim to, but each claim is reinscribed within the implicit counterclaim of the other's claim. Each signature fails to control the text. Each falls into the text at the same time the text loses each as its controlling signature in the classical sense. From Glas:

The text re(mains)--falls (to the tomb), the signature re(mains)--falls (tombs)--the text. The signature remain(s) resides and falls (to the tomb), the signature remain(s) house and tomb. The text labors to give up the signature as lost. . . . (4b-5b)

"Who [then] is the author of the scarlet letter?" Flores asks (320).

Borderlines

The "logic" of the signature is a logic of the borderline, of the edge the successful crossing of which would take one to what mimesis promises is the outside of the text as well as its before and after.

The Scarlet Letter breaks the promise.

The first chapter of The Scarlet Letter concludes with a self-trope image. The narrator notes a rosebush growing out of the prison-door threshold that doubles as the threshold of the romance. The rosebush is "directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal," the prison door (SL, 39). The narrative that has already begun is about to issue forth. Thus, the narrating voice is inscribed within the text as situating itself before the story. The narrating voice will oversee the birth of the narrative

just as a narrating voice (another voice? the same voice?) has situated itself at the conception of the narrative in "The Custom-House" both as witness (countersigner of Pue's authentic document) and participant (editor, self-licensing embellisher). The narrator tells the story as if it could have a beginning outside the text, as if it could have a beginning, while the text says that the beginning or outside is already part of the narrative. The text shows the narrating voice to be caught up in that voice's primal scene fantasy. The text has already given birth to the narrating voice that then claims to be present at the threshold as the narrative is about to issue forth.

Hester Prynne crosses the threshold of the prison door-cum-narrative, carrying in her arms the infant who has issued forth before the narrative, which has already issued forth, issues forth.

All that I have argued about the trait and the signature here applies to the paternal metaphor that governs the problem of Pearl's paternity and the corresponding problem of narrative beginnings. In both cases the issue is the issue of issue. Both Pearl and the romance issue from a kind of primal scene. The text indicates that the conception of others can be imagined, represented, alluded to, however obliquely or ambiguously. Thus, I disagree that Pearl's conception is not represented, let alone not representable, within The Scarlet Letter. What the text does indicate is unrepresentable is its conception. The conception of its textuality in particular and textuality in general cannot be conceived. That is the force of the falling, entombed signature. The Scarlet Letter has always already begun. Every one of The Scarlet Letter's narrative attempts to specify its origin finds itself already inscribed within the text. Thus, the romance reads its own

narrator and inscribes this single-plural voice within its textuality. The romance tells (itself) the narrator's telling of the romance. Thus, too, the romance reads and signs against every mimetic reading of the romance, including the various efforts to return the text to its supposed original author, Hawthorne, as if Hawthorne were not already "Hawthorne," as the narrating voice is already of the text it would stand beyond.

The Scarlet Letter inscribes the non-beginning of its textuality in relation to its (non)ending. But it is a (non)endingness that does not promise life.

In the penultimate chapter, Dimmesdale attempts to allegorize himself, to turn "his dying into an act of dying, into something significant, into a confession which makes him 'true'" (Flores, 333). The truth, however, never occurs as such; to the extent that a revelation takes place, it does not take place.

In relation to this revelation without revelation, the family scene--Pearl Kissing Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne "supporting his head against her bosom," the dying man whispering his last words to Hester Prynne (SL, 180)--allegorizes death and dying as a moment in the life of the spirit.

This is a scene of death as something meaningful, and it begins a process of reconciliation, incorporation, idealization, mourning. . . . This process is a connecting of corpse and monument, of decaying body and "unchanging" (universal) spirit; it is thus an operation and guarding of the sign, of allegory and theatre. Death is posed as meaningful; the audience to the scene is moved, feels some significance, and so allegory (the work of allegory, mourning, staging) continues to go on. (Flores, 334-35)

Yes, except that it is a remarked notion of allegory that continues to go on, an allegory without ground, without, among other assurances, the

assurance that the end of life is the continued life of the spirit or that the beginning of life is even life. Since the text has rendered the distinction between life and death problematical, and since the text withholds Dimmesdale's dying revelation, the death scene reactivates all of the textual difficulties in establishing its reference.

What happens when The Scarlet Letter does offer a point of "reference" for Dimmesdale's death and then for Hester Prynne's--the tombstone? The two are buried side by side, "yet with a space between them, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tombstone served them both" (SL, 186). Their death is marked by the tombstone and its "device." The Scarlet Letter concludes with this narrative elaboration of the grave (SL, 186):

It bore a device, a herald's wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so sombre is it, and relieved by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:--

"ON A FIELD SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES."

This inscription, of course, is problematical. The tombstone does not seem to bear the concluding words, capitalized and in quotation marks, but a "device" which "might" be translated by these words. In addition, the second "it" is ambiguous; it is able to refer to the tombstone, to the tombstone's device, to the translation of the device into the motto, to the legend, and to the letter A. Furthermore, "its" somberness is relieved by a light gloomier than the shadow. What shadow? The last line, perhaps? Does this line not cast a shadow? Is this line the light that is gloomier than the shadow that relieves the somberness of its wording?

The point of reference for Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, at the "end," is the reinscription of reference within the text's textuality. Perhaps the "motto" is a "legend" for reading "our now concluded legend." For reading such a concluded legend's reference back to itself. The final line is the only line other than the textual maxim that has no speaker, no writer--no source other than the text. At the end, the narrator signs off in citation with a sentence that repeats in code the nomination that entitles the romance. The "letter A, gules" occupies the corresponding position at the ostensible end of the text as "The Scarlet Letter" does at the ostensible beginning. Which is the "first" appearance of the A? Do they not cite each other, thereby placing the romance in the abyss of itself? Thereby placing the romance in the crypt of itself wherein the text's signature, its signature of signature, is encrypted? Thereby placing the romance in the ceaseless performance of itself, of its mourning of the displaced reference the A attempts to mime in its a-mimesis of truth?

NOTES

1

For a discussion that places the "structure" of the remark in relation to Derrida's recasting of the ground of philosophy in terms of "undecidables," "infrastructures," or "quasi-synthetic concepts," see Rodolphe Gasche's The Tain of the Mirror, especially the subsection, "The Infrastructure as Re-Mark" (217-23).

As one among many "undecidables," the remark, according to Gasche, "opens up the possibility of referentiality within the play of application of one work to another" (218). However, this referentiality will postpone its referents. Because the mark "acquires the ideal identity necessary to its iteration as the mark of something other than itself only to the extent that it is constituted by what it is not, the totalizing semic mark must also inscribe or insert itself within the differential structure of the mark, that which makes the mark possible. The mark must thus be marked, or re-marked, by its own mark (margin)" (219-220). As a consequence, "this re-marking of the mark does not come from the outside, nor does it accidentally affect the mark or series of marks" (220). Nor does it come after the mark has been made but as the mark is being made, as the making of the mark, though this making also unmakes it. In some sense the remark is "in advance" of the mark, though this "in advance" is not a temporal priority. "Since no mark, whether an individual mark or the 'concept' of the mark, can function without referring to that which makes it possible, the mark is in advance re-marked. The re-mark only makes the mark a mark" (220). In making the mark a mark, the remark interrupts the possibility of its self-identity; it unmakes the mark as such.

The general law of the remark opens the possibility of reference, but it is a reference without referent: "since the other to which the mark refers in order to be itself can only be another mark and not the punctuality of a present instance or moment, it must always be a referring without referent" (220). As I shall attempt to demonstrate, The Scarlet Letter remarks its truth; it inserts the word "true" and its concept into the text in such a way that they participate in a system of reference without referent. In other words, The Scarlet Letter indicates the amimeticism of its truth.

2

In an unpublished lecture on Kafka's The Trial, Leavey has argued how, like Joseph K., "we are always already under arrest": the law of law is that the situation of the law is always already." Law governs the condition of freedom as well as the condition of arrest. Hence once can never be free of the law; even in one's innocence, one is determined --arrested--by the law. Leavey's analysis enables him to generalize the law much as Derrida's analysis of textuality enables him to generalize the text. In the rest of his lecture, Leavey sketches the relation of

law and textuality. My intent has been to examine how particular laws, the laws proscribing adultery and the begetting of children out of wedlock, function within the general law--"the process and possibility of the law"--that Leavey has traced with respect to The Trial.

3

The founding event, then, is a fiction, as Derrida indicates in "The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration": in "the founding of a nation, state, or nation-state . . . the properly performative act must produce (proclaim) what in the form of a constative act it merely claims, declares, assumes it is describing. The simulacrum or fiction then consists in bringing to daylight, in giving birth to, that which one claims to reflect so as to take note of it, as though it were a matter of recording what will have been there, the unity of a nation, the founding of a state, while one is in the act of producing that event" (18).

Hester Prynne challenges particular laws of her community and so challenges the fiction that the lawfulness of the laws existed prior to their installation. In challenging the constative legal act that outlaws adultery and the begetting of children out of wedlock, that is, in challenging the law that governs reproduction and thus the production of new life, Hester Prynne challenges the Puritan state's inaugural performative act by which it came into its statehood under the fiction of a self-founding or self-birthing. In giving birth outside the particular laws, Hester Prynne throws the state back to the scene of its birth and the birth of the laws that subsequently are put into effect to govern, among other behaviors, the acts that lead to giving birth.

4

The second scaffold scene follows Freud's "kettle logic": (a) The light wasn't distinct at all but dull and dusky. (b) There was no A in the sky; Dimmesdale alone imagined he saw an A ("But what shall we say, when an individual discovers a revelation addressed to himself alone . . ." [SL, 113], and did so out of his morbid egotism. (c) And anyway, the A stood for angel, not for Dimmesdale's secret pain. In sum, the scene's "kettle logic" disrupts the possibility of its purported representations--its reference, its mimesis.

5

For a review of the issue of Hawthorne's style, see John Franzosa's article, "A Psychoanalysis of Hawthorne's Style."

6

For example, "Dimmesdale's quasi-confessional effort" to confess his sinfulness "mimes truth-telling, and does so in the proper forum (theatre) for confessions," Flores writes. "The minister at one point imagines a confession 'from his own pulpit' [SL, 105] in which first-person pronouns are displayed in an impressive series of anaphoras: 'I, whom you behold in these black garments of the priesthood,--I who ascend the sacred desk, and turn my pale face heavenward, taking upon myself to hold communion, in your behalf, with the Most High Omniscience . . . I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!' [SL, 105]. Note that even in his imagining a confession, the

act is still a performance. This being so, at what point can the act be said to be 'real' or grounded?" (222-23).

7

When Dimmesdale begins his defense of Hester Prynne, he begins in a self-citation that anticipates or recalls the self-citation of the textual maxim: "'There is truth in what she says,' began the minister, with a voice sweet, tremulous, but powerful, insomuch that the hall reechoed, and the hollow armours rang with it--'truth in what Hester says . . .'" (SL, 84-85). Dimmesdale's echoing voice indicates the possibility that his speech begins in echo and that the echolalia of voice is the echolalia of truth--that truth is a hall of echoes.

PART II

AMIMESIS OF THE I:
HOMELESSNESS AND NARRATIVE DISASTER IN MOBY-DICK

"What is 'familiarily known' is not properly known,
just for the reason that it is 'familiar.'"

--Hegel (92)

"The German word unheimlich is obviously the opposite
of heimlich, heimisch, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,'
'belonging to the home'; and we are tempted to con-
clude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening pre-
cisely because it is not known and familiar."

--Freud (1963, 21)

"Man, in one word, is deinotaton, the strangest.
This one word encompasses the extreme limits and
abrupt abysses of his being. . . . Man is to
deinotaton, the strangest of the strange. . . ."

"But why do we translate deinon as "strange"
<unheimlich>?"

--Heidegger (125, 126)

"I have proposed . . . an interpretation of the
equivalence, 'I am': 'I am living': 'I am dead.'"

--Derrida (1982, 295)

CHAPTER 3
UNCANNY NARRATION IN MOBY-DICK

In Part I, I attempted to demonstrate how the trait structure disperses every effort of the romance as well as of the criticism of the romance to establish an outside reference for the text. The Scarlet Letter textually blocks--by means of the trait, the scaffold, the law, light, the allegorical sign, authority, signature, the A--the movement of truth. In fact, it shows how these blockings operate "inside" of truth.

In Part II, as I indicated in the introduction, I attempt to extend the amimesis of truth to the amimesis of I. In Part I, I asked what happens when the basis of mimesis, truth, is thematized in a text in a way that withdraws truth in its presentation. In this second part, I ask what happens when the mimetic perspective is applied to a narrating voice that attempts, in terms of the notion of homelessness, to represent the limits of narrative representation in relation to the limits of life.

More specifically, what is the law of amimesis when applied to the familiar and the unfamiliar alike, the one within the other, and to the familial and unfamiliar, also the one within the other, in Moby-Dick? When applied to the scene of the family in Moby-Dick, for example, or to the novel's I, especially when it narrates familiarly? And especially, too, when it attempts to incorporate the strange into an idiom of the familial? As I will show, the word "strange" appears in nearly every

chapter of Moby-Dick in relation to a family scene. How is such a narrative conjunction of the familiar and the strange, the familial and the strange possible? What kind of reference does it produce?

Three arguments developed from Freud's essay, "The Uncanny," will orient the following discussion. (1) The structure of the uncanny is the structure of repression. Phenomenologically, the uncanny is experienced as a certain frightful feeling: it "belongs to all that is terrible," Freud says in his study of Hoffman's "The Sand Man," "to all that arouses dread and creeping horror . . ." (1963, 19). This uncanny emotionality, however, functions within an economy of knowledge. On the one hand, "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" but now forgotten. On the other hand, "everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light" (20 and 28). The uncanny signals a return of something repressed. This is Freud's interest: not the affective topography of the uncanny but its signifying character, the something that was known and will be known again.

(2) Freud identifies this "something" as "the dread of castration" and, in his analysis of Hoffman's tale, locates it in the child's castration complex. However, if one were to understand the cutting off of a part of the body in castration as a particular instance of a larger category of severings, and if one were to understand certain of the infant's early experiences of separations from the mother as experiences of being cut off, then one would be able to conceptualize the uncanny in preoedipal as well as oedipal terms.

(3) In either case, the consequent psychic wounding is familial and of the home. Thus, it is overdetermined--and "uncanny"?--that Freud

should designate the uncanny by the German unheimlich, the "unhomely," and that he should determine the unheimlich as "in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich" (30). The question of the uncanny, then, is the question of the home, of the unhomeness of the home.

In classical terms, Ishmael as mimetic character tries throughout his narrative to economize the strange home, to domesticate the strange so as to make a narrative home of homelessness. Does he succeed, and what does this narrative project indicate about the relation of homelessness and the narrating I in Moby-Dick?

Ishmael introduces the theme of the uncanny early in the novel. On the morning after his first night with Queequeg, he awakens to the "bridegroom clasp" of his bedmate. Perhaps because Queequeg's tattooed arm blends with the patchwork counterpane, Ishmael recalls his boyhood counterpane dream. "My sensations were strange," Ishmael says. "Let me try to explain them" (MD, 32)¹. Thereupon he tells how his stepmother, "who, somehow or other, was all the time whipping me, or sending me to bed supperless," had caught him "trying to crawl up the chimney" (MD, 32). She punishes him by sending him to bed in midafternoon. Eventually he falls into "a troubled nightmare of a doze." When he awakens, "half steeped in dreams,"

the before sunlit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bed-side. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me.
 . . . (MD, 33)

From his sense of fright (the nightmare sleep, the shock, the fears, the immobility) to his sense of the supernatural (the hand, the "nameless form or phantom," the spell), Ishmael recalls his confounding experience in terms of the uncanny. Of the terrifying sequence Ishmael remarks that "whether it was reality or dream, I could never entirely settle" (MD, 32). This ambiguity itself doubles the ambiguity of the hand which is at once both at hand, literally, and yet, because he cannot recognize it, out of imaginative reach. The hand is too familiar, too intimate; and yet it belongs to a "phantom." Ishmael strains to give name and form to the spectre, but it remains for him nameless, silent, and unimaginable.

What is this uncanny hand and Ishmael's dread of it? As others have suggested, perhaps it is the ambivalent hand of a stepmother who, having raised a hand against her stepson, now seeks to hold hands with him? Perhaps the uncanny hand is a canny one after all.

Perhaps, too, it is a masturbatory hand. Leslie Fiedler all but declares Ishmael's attempt "to crawl up his mother's chimney" a metaphorical enactment of oedipal desire (375). Thus, the counterpane episode might work by reaction-formation to transform a masturbatory act or wish with respect to the step mother--he is frozen (stiff?)--into a punishing sense of shock, vulnerability, and dread. Later, of course, Ishmael will be able to stir his hand--and no longer with petrifying horror but with dreamy, masturbatory delight as he squeezes whale sperm and expostulates: "Come; let us squeeze hands all around; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other" (MD, 349). He seems to have returned from the uncanny, from the unhomely, to a realm of "attainable felicity" which he will seemingly cannily locate "in the wife, the heart, the bed,

the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (MD, 349)--in the home.

Except that the home, the heimlich, is precisely the site of the unheimlich, so that to return home may not be to return from the uncanny but to return to it and yet another encounter with terror and dread.

Immediately after recalling the counterpane experience, Ishmael returns to his present feelings of strangeness upon awakening to the counterpaned arm of Queequeg: "Now, take away the awful fear, and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me" (MD, 33). But take away that awful fear and what is the strangeness? Isn't it a familiarity, an intimacy without threat? And yet isn't such intimacy strange insofar as the powerful hand and arm of this cannibal harpooner do not punish but are recognized by Ishmael to hold him "in the most loving and affectionate manner" (MD, 32)? For the little boy who was all the time being whipped (MD, 32), the supernatural hand might very well terrify, and terrify all the more in withholding its punishment, for the deferral of that punishment might itself be punishing by prolonging the time of threat and the child's anticipation of being hurt. Such a bind holds the child in a circuit of punishment effects even in the absence of punishment and is itself evocative of the feeling of the uncanny. Indeed, the very doubleness of the bind reconstitutes one of the archaic features of the uncanny. Whereas the double usually appears as a separate figure, in the circuit of punishment-punishment withheld the double appears within the same person. Here, the non-punishing figure prefigures itself as a punishing one. This is Ishmael's dilemma with

respect to Queequeg's embrace "as though naught but death should part us twain" (MD, 33), for the embrace holds within itself just that possibility of death that would part the two. His embrace is, therefore, both a figure of love and life and also an uncanny prefigure of death. Such is the doubleness of the unheimlich that Ishmael approaches and avoids the uncanny by means of the uncanny itself, or at least by one of its affective effects.

Ishmael attempts to protect himself from the strange by rhetorically identifying with it, by reducing it to a familiar category. Such a strategy of address defers what would otherwise evoke fear and trembling by deferring to it. Any number of examples could be adduced of how Ishmael marks as strange just those moments of "attainable felicity," of intimacy, of homeness. When he and Queequeg become "bosom buddies," he relates that "I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (MD, 53). For Ishmael, the savage redeems the world's savagery; through him, Ishmael enters into the strange as into a fraternal communion. The terrifying nature of homelessness melts away; the strange becomes something which he can turn toward and merge with rather than something which petrifies and cuts through him. To put the matter differently, insofar as "the wolfish world" threatens to terrify or otherwise unman Ishmael, or to splinter his heart and madden his hand again, Ishmael preempts the terror by signing it, by affixing it to himself--here, to his affective life--as a sign of his wonder that he could feel something other than fright or its splintering, maddening derivatives. Of course, he can only do so by acknowledging the wolfish

world as an ever imminent possibility of what he would domesticate. In other words, Ishmael displaces the relation between the uncanny and the canny in Freud's scheme. For Freud, the uncanny is a subset of the canny; here, the canny is the subset.

To take another example, "stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities," Peleg says, in summing up his description of that "moody--desperate moody, and savage sometimes" captain (MD, 77). Peleg's words fill Ishmael

with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him, but for I don't know what, unless it was the cruel loss of his leg. And yet I also felt a strange awe of him; but that sort of awe, which I cannot at all describe, was not exactly awe; I do not know what it was. (MD, 77)

Again, Ishmael domesticates the strange in the very act of invoking the strange and its emotional context of desperation, savagery, strickenness, and pain. If such a rhetorical maneuver keeps at a distance the prospect of being blasted, it also keeps that prospect alive. It imaginatively vivifies the potential of the threat. Thus, again, Ishmael displaces the priority Freud assigns to the canny in his equivocation about the strange which is familiar only because the familiar is strange.

Yet another time Ishmael assimilates the strange and potentially uncanny to the familiar and safe. The occasion is Queequeg's death-bed fever and progressive emaciation. Ishmael understands full well why Queequeg takes sick--Queequeg is overworked in the best of the voyage's circumstances and must, among his worst labors, "finally descend into the gloom of the hold, and bitterly sweating all day in that subterraneous confinement, resolutely manhandle the clumsiest casks and see to

their stowage" (MD, 395). Nevertheless Ishmael remarks about Queequeg that, "strange to say, for all the heat of his sweatings, he caught a terrible chill which lapsed into a fever . . ." (MD, 395). "Strange to say"--Ishmael's formulaic invocation of the strange mystifies Queequeg's illness and suffering, cuts it off from its all too familiar material causes. Ishmael goes on to write of Queequeg's tabescent body, but what he sees of his wasting friend quickly becomes a sign of comfort:

How he wasted and wasted away . . . till there seemed but little left of him but his frame and tattooing. But as all else in him thinned, and his cheekbones grew sharper, his eyes, nevertheless, seemed growing fuller and fuller; they became of a strange softness of lustre; and mildly but deeply looked out at you there from his sickness, a wondrous testimony to that immortal health in him which could not die, or be weakened. (MD, 395)

Queequeg does recover, but he is not immortal; he is annihilated at the novel's end, of course, along with the rest of the crew save Ishmael. Ishmael, then, evades any possible or actual horror at the sight of his dying friend by idealizing him, by attributing to the signs of his wasting an exactly contrary meaning, and a "strange" meaning for that very reason. The series of negative conjunctions--"but" repeats four times--sets up and frames the reversal by which Ishmael's use of the word "strange" can denote not a horror but a scoptical fullness and wonder, a softness, a luster, a mildness and profoundness. Ishmael envisions not death but death defeated, not an inexorable cutting off of life but the promise of a godly being now finally about to return home to, now at home in, his immortality.

The rest of Ishmael's paeon to Queequeg continues in this strain and enables Ishmael to associate the strange with what he imagines to be Queequeg's apotheosizing ascension "higher and higher toward his

destined heaven" (MD, 396)--his home of homes. Ishmael idealizes the strange--he renders the strange familiar, safe, secure, comforting, and testamentary--and thus he severs the strange from itself. He forestalls the uncanny by trying to be at home with it.

The most uncanny example of this narrative strategy occurs in a sequence of self-inverting reflections on the "gallied" armada of sperm whales. After pursuing the magnificent school of whales for several hours, the chase boats are ready to give up "when a general pausing commotion among the whales gave animating token that they were now at last under the influence of that strange perplexity of inert irresolution" (MD, 322). They are "gallied." And in that "strange" condition they unaccountably "seemed going mad with consternation" (MD, 322). The panic of the herd of whales "was still more strangely evinced by those of their number, who, completely paralysed as it were, helplessly floated . . ." (MD, 322). Having alluded to a sense of distress among the whales, Ishmael immediately familiarizes this scene and yet underscores its violence by comparing the whales to those alike gallied humans who, "when herded together in the sheep-fold of a theatre's pit . . . will, at the slightest alarm of fire, rush helter-skelter for the outlets, crowding, trampling, jamming, and remorselessly dashing each other to death" (MD, 322). Ishmael then concludes: "Best, therefore, withhold any amazement at the strangely gallied whales before us, for there is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men." Again, what interests me in the comparison is Ishmael's tactic of reducing the strange to the less than strange by appealing to two different orders of the strange. Thus, he holds up an image of finite strangeness--the gallied whales--in relation

to a notion of infinite strangeness that mitigates, by contrast, the force associated with its finite counterpart. For Ishmael, the trebly remarked strangeness of the whales apparently disappears in relation to the infinite madness of men; while the strangeness of the whales is visible, because it is finite, bounded, and limited, it is finally not strange compared to the unlimited strangeness of humans in their mad self-estrangement. The strangeness of the whales, all the more familiar for the contrast to the infinite strangeness of humans, constitutes a specular image, for Ishmael, of human strangeness as somehow familiar.

The image of the "strangely gallied" beasts, of their "strange perplexity," will shortly give way to an astonishing image of birth, maternal succor, and enchantment--a vision, for want of another word, of at-home-ness. This strange sight comforts and solaces. At the center of the herd the "young, unsophisticated, and every way innocent and inexperienced" whales "evinced a wondrous fearlessness and confidence, or else a still, becharmed panic which it was impossible not to marvel at" (MD, 325). Ishmael continues:

But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side. For, suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers. (MD, 325)

What begins as the life-threatening strangeness, the commotions of the whales, becomes the contrary, life-affirming strangeness of "the innermost heart of the shoal" (MD, 324) where fright has given way to an "enchanted calm" and where, "surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights," the whales "revelled in dalliance and delight" (MD, 326). Ishmael, too, imaginatively revels in the "enchanted

pond": "amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I still for ever centrally disport in mute calm . . . deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy" (MD, 326). According to Fiedler,

Ishmael interprets his glimpse into the world of natural immortality, where life is endlessly renewed by physical generation, as a guarantee that there is a renewal of the spirit, too, in human "dalliance and delight," which is all the immortality man can ever achieve. (383-84)

For Fiedler, "the heart of living mysteries" discloses "birth and copulation but no death" (384 and 383).

Not so, not so. In the midst of this living mystery there is not only death but the spectre of terrible, uncanny death: a murderous violence riddles the scene of "natural immortality."

Just before he envisions "all peaceful concernments" (MD, 326), and just after he evokes the "stranger world" of the "nursing mothers of the whale" and their cubs and the "maternal reticule" of the still pregnant dams "where, tail to head, and all ready for the final spring, the unborn whale lies bent like a Tartar's bow" (MD, 325)--just after this evocation of birth, Ishmael returns to the business at hand, the killing of whales. The harpooned whale (victim of a different "Tartar's bow") that has pulled Ishmael's boat into "the innermost heart of the shoal," has back-tracked, and the now slack whale line has become entangled with the umbilical cord of a newly born cub. However, Ishmael does not note the impending infanticide.

As when the stricken whale, that from the tub has reeled out hundreds of fathoms of rope; as, after deep sounding, he floats up again, and shows the slackened curling line buoyantly rising and spiralling towards the air; so now, Starbuck saw long coils of the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan, by which the young cub seemed still tethered

to its dam. Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped. Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond. We saw young Leviathan amours in the deep. (MD, 325-26)

"Birth and copulation but no death," Fiedler says? Of a whaler's meditation on a strange but not uncommon scene in the midst of the slaughter of nursing and still pregnant whales and newborn cubs? How has he passed over the image of the fatally snared cub, surely one of the most emotionally taxing images of the novel, and surely one that interprets Ahab's death? At the innermost heart of the shoal there is not just birth but birth in jeopardy. A parturition has become the impending destruction of a Leviathan mother and child. Fiedler's interpretation represses the matricidal and infanticidal moment just as Ishmael's does when he turns away from the endangered mother and cub to the amorous adult whales. So Fiedler is correct after all: "Birth and copulation and no death" in Ishmael's account. But no death only because Ishmael averts his eyes in an astonishing--an uncanny?--evasion. One of "the subtlest secrets" of the novel is divulged, I believe, in the "enchanted pond" of Ishmael's rhetoric--the way Ishmael protects himself, estranges himself, from the uncanny violence, the unheimlich violence, the unhoming or orphaning or killing violence amidst the "still stranger world" of maternal succoring and primal amours.

The pattern repeats. At the end of the just-cited passage, Melville includes a footnote in which he, too, enacts the repression of infanticide and matricide:

When by chance these precious parts [the teats] in a nursing whale are cut by the hunter's lance, the mother's pouring milk and blood rivallingly discolor the sea for rods. The milk is very sweet and rich

. . . it might do well with strawberries. When overflowing with mutual esteem, the whales salute more hominum. (MD, 326n)

Melville notes the mutilation of the mother whale, but he does not bring himself to name the matricidal and infanticidal consequences: the whale may bleed to death and the cub will starve. One might, of course, interpret Melville's footnote as a canny framing of Ishmael's repression. In either case the two passages point to a breach in the rhetoric of maternity: the primal scenes of "Leviathan amours" in Ishmael's passage and of whales saluting "more hominum" in Melville's note replace the infanticidal and matricidal scenes of the trapped cub and the mutilated mother unable to nurse her young. The second passage, moreover, appended to the first as its explanatory subtext, reconstitutes the pattern of astonishing repression in mid-sentence.

The pattern repeats yet again. Ishmael turns from the center of the shoal, from the copulating whales and the vision of dalliance and delight, to the circumference of the shoal where the Pequod's other two boat crews are lancing whales. There, one whale in particular has been maimed: "in the extraordinary agony of the wound, he was now dashing among the revolving circles . . . carrying disarray wherever he went" (MD, 326). The spectacle is, for Ishmael, "appalling," one of "peculiar horror":

But agonizing as was the wound of this whale, and an appalling spectacle enough, any way; yet the peculiar horror with which he seemed to inspire the rest of the herd, was owing to a cause which at first the intervening distance obscured from us. But at length we perceived that by one of the unimaginable accidents of the fishery, this whale had become entangled in the harpoon line that he towed; he had also run away with the cutting-spade in him; and while the free end of the rope attached to that weapon, had permanently caught in the coils of the harpoon-line round his tail, the cutting-

spade itself had worked loose from his flesh. So that tormented to madness, he was now churning through the water, violently flailing with his flexible tail, and tossing the keen spade about him, wounding and murdering his own comrades. (327)

Ishmael's repression is double. He has just mentioned, with respect to the subsequently repressed image of the endangered cub, that "not seldom in the vicissitudes of the chase this maternal line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped." Now, a page later, he refers to the "unimaginable accidents" by which the whale has become entangled in the harpoon line. It is as if the repressed has returned to haunt the narrating voice. Ishmael's response is to redouble the repression of the matricidal and infanticidal consequences of the appalling violence: some of the maimed and killed whales are mothers and cubs. Within a short while the violence that Ishmael has from the beginning associated with the boat's (phallic) penetration of the center returns from the circumference to the center. The whales "began to crowd a little, and tumble against each other. . . ." Then "the submarine bridal-chambers and nurseries vanished. . . ." Soon "the entire host of whales came tumbling upon their inner centre, as if to pile themselves up in one common mountain" (MD, 327). Eventually Ishmael's boat "at last swiftly glided into what had just been one of the outer circles, but now crossed by random whales, all violently making for one centre" (MD, 327). Just as for Freud the boundary between the "unhomely" and the "homely" collapses in upon itself as he formulates his notion of a certain aesthetic of horror, so too for Ishmael does the boundary between center and circumference disappear as he describes his experience of uncanny beauty and horror. No matter how much he tries to place the "appalling

spectacle" and its terrifying violence on the horizon, he is haunted by their return to the center of his narration. And if the center designates a metaphorical home or homeness, it comes to designate an uncanny homelessness as well, and not just a homelessness but a homelessness at the very center of life, a homelessness of the home, with matricidal and especially infanticidal violence its most direful sign.

For Freud, the source of the uncanny is the dread of castration. In commenting upon Hoffman's tale, Freud resolutely traces all acts of violence against parts of the body (the mutilation of eyes, for example) or against the body as a whole to fears of violence against the genitals. Freud alludes to his interpretation of Oedipus to validate this reduction. Nevertheless, Oedipus himself is the intended victim of his father's infanticidal attempts on his life. Freud notes that "in blinding himself, Oedipus . . . was simply carrying out a mitigated form of the punishment of castration--the only punishment that according to the lex talionis was fitted for him" (1963, 36). To be sure, the slashing of his eyes makes sense as a displacement of a genital slashing, especially insofar as Oedipus has committed a genital crime. But the slashing of eyes also makes sense as a displacement of the father's efforts to kill Oedipus by piercing his ankles and letting him die of exposure. The Greek word, arthron, signifies both socket and the piece that moves within the socket and thus was used to designate both eye and joint. Oedipus was pierced through the ankles or joints (arthra) of his feet, and he sticks Jocasta's pins into his eyeballs (arthra).² In blinding himself, Oedipus may have acted out a version of the violence directed against him by his father. So, too, Nathaniel in Hoffman's "The Sand Man": in flinging himself off the roof he may have acted out

his father's infanticidal wish or the similar wish of the Sand Man. Such possibilities provide a way of understanding the unheimlich, the homelessness of the home, as a preoedipal experience of infanticidal jeopardy as well as an oedipal one. Allusions to such uncanny jeopardy recur throughout Moby-Dick.

Ishmael adopts his narrative name, perhaps as he wishes himself to be adopted, and in any case thereby anticipates how he, as an orphan, will be rescued by his Rachel. Ishmael's name, of course, alludes to the Biblical Ishmael, disinherited son of Abraham, a disinheriting evocative of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice--to make an infanticide of--his other son, Isaac. The Biblical Ishmael is fated to be "a wild man: his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him . . ." (Genesis 16:12). Melville's Ishmael shares his counterpart's rage: "whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from . . . knocking people's hats off--then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." This, he says, "is my substitute for pistol and ball" (MD, 12).

Going to sea is also his substitute for infanticidal jeopardy. A kind of internal compass points Ishmael to the "great original" (MD, 17) of the whaling business, Nantucket, for he has determined to ship out from this spot of land only. Why? Ishmael explains the "wondrous" "legend" of this island:

In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast, and carried off an infant Indian in his talons. With loud lament the parents saw their child borne out of sight over the wide waters. They resolved to follow in the same direction. Setting out in their canoes, after a perilous passage they discovered the island, and there they found an empty ivory casket,--the poor little Indian's skeleton.

What wonder, then, that these Nantucketers,
born on a beach, should take to the sea for a live-
lihood! (MD, 62)

The founding event--an infanticide--makes explicit the foundling event--
the orphaning threat of infanticide. And vice versa. In relation to
this legend, which doubles as a "legend" for his psychic geography,
Ishmael signs aboard the Pequod. For Ishmael as for the aboriginal
Nantucketers, the sea--not the land, above all not the land of infanti-
cide, but the sea--is home:

There is his home. . . . For years he knows not the
land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells
like another world, more strangely than the moon
would to an Earthsman. With the landless gull, that
at sunset folds her wings and is rocked to sleep
between billows; so at nightfall, the Nantucketer,
out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him
to rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of
walruses and whales. (MD, 63; first emphasis in the
original)

And yet, if the Nantucketer is at home only when at sea, he is never
simply at home, never simply at sea, since he always carries the desig-
nation of the land, of Nantucket, with him. The designation is
inscribed in the categorical name--Nantucketer--Ishmael gives to this
person. It is a proper name that is "improper," a canny or heimlich
name that contains the trace of the unheimlich. The strange smell of
the land reminds the Nantucketer--or Ishmael--that his birthplace was a
place of estrangement, nonidentity, and death. Ishmael, then, will ship
out from the island of infanticide aboard a ship named after a "now
extinct" tribe of Indians (MD, 67). Of course extinct: because the
threat of infanticidal extinction, whether individual or tribal, defines
and has defined from the dead end of the beginning the course of uncanny
wandering, of the homelessness, inscribed in the name "Ishmael."

If infanticide can denote the extremest danger and the uncanniest of human relations, then Queequeg's "Congo idol" (MD, 30) comically represents the nature of Queequeg's ironically pagan solution--a form of religious observance that specifies in its iconography the fact of infant jeopardy. Thus, Queequeg worships "a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the color of a three days' old Congo baby" (MD, 30). Ishmael, hidden in Queequeg's bed, is quick to wonder whether "this black manikan was a real baby"--an infanticide--embalmed like the heads Queequeg peddles. Ishmael watches Queequeg honor his "wooden idol" and notes that "all these strange antics" of Queequeg "were accompanied by still stranger guttural noises from the devotee. . . ." (MD, 30). When he is done, Queequeg "bags" his idol, his "Congo baby," "as carelessly as if he were a sportsman bagging a dead woodcock" (MD, 30). A parodic inversion of the primal father, Queequeg's totem is the image of a child, one that recalls an insistent fear of childhood injury. Thus, Ishmael witnesses Queequeg's rites from the wedding bed of Mr. and Mrs. Coffin. It is in this bed, shared with his young children and his wife, that Peter Coffin "somehow" kicked one of his sons onto the floor, "near breaking his arm" (MD, 27). In this bed, Ishmael finally falls blissfully asleep only to awaken in a "strange house" to the memory of the counterpane nightmare, Queequeg's "horse collar" grip, and a "slight scratch" from the pagan's tomahawk which Ishmael calls, in terms evocative of infanticide--or parricide--a "hatchet-faced baby" (MD, 33). Congo idol, marriage bed, nightmare, and tomahawk: four times over Ishmael invokes an image of infant or childhood danger. Four times over he experiences a return of anxiety, comically framed, over the strange possibility of primal harm.

This sense of harm pervades Ishmael's sense of the world and recurs throughout the novel in the many allusions to being abandoned or cast away and to child abuse. These allusions insistently reconstitute the danger of a time long past that haunts time present in Ishmael's narrative. They weave the uncanny, the homelessness of the home, in its preoedipal expressions into the very texture of the text.

One sequence of allusions occurs shortly before the Pequod meets the Rachel. The log line has just broken and the log been lost. Ahab declares he "can mend all" and shortly thereafter addresses Pip, who answers with an uncanny evocation of his own dismembered and castaway condition:

"Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from the whaleboat. Pip's missing. Let's see now if ye haven't fished him up here, fisherman. It drags hard; I guess he's holding on. Jerk him, Tahiti! Jerk him off; we haul in no cowards here. Ho! there's his arm just breaking water. A hatchet! a hatchet! cut if off--we haul in no cowards here."
(MD, 427)

Pip's language underscores the threat of mutilation and castration contained in Queequeg's Congo idol; and Pip's (masturbatory and homoerotic) deference to the threat of dismemberment doubles but reverses Queequeg's rite of worship. Pip's gesture of submission also doubles but reverses Ahab's postures of domination. In any case, Ahab is moved; he reaches out to this orphan and makes explicit the context of infant abandonment as he discovers in Pip a living log and in himself a living line: "'Oh, ye frozen heavens!'" Ahab expostulates:

"Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him. . . . Here boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings." (MD, 428)

Ahab then melodramatically repudiates "the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man" and takes on the office of speaking on behalf of man who, "'though idiotic, and knowing not what he does,'" is "'yet full of sweet things of love and gratitude'" (MD, 428), as if he himself were the exemplary Comforter, maternal paraclete to castaway humankind. Ahab's apostrophe--theatrical, self-conscious, and hyperbolically self-pitying--projects a self-image he will immediately reject along with its obligations, just as he will refuse the Rachel's search for her homeless ones.

In the meantime, guided by Ahab's instruments of homelessness, his "level log and line," the Pequod sails through "strange" and "monotonously mild" waters "preluding some riotous and desperate scene" (428). It is a scene of infanticidal haunting, and it repeats the archetypal circumstances of Christ's birth. Thus, as the Pequod and crew near the "Equatorial fishing-ground" during the night,

the watch . . . was startled by a cry so plaintively wild and unearthly--like half-articulated wailings of the ghosts of all Herod's murdered Innocents--that one and all, they started from their reveries. . . . (MD, 428-29)

Ahab sleeps through the ghastly sounds. In the morning he "hollowly laughs" as he scorns the crews' fears. But even Ahab, in explaining away the cries as merely those of seals, invokes the spectre of (matricidal and infanticidal) homelessness. "Some young seals that had lost their dams, or some dams that had lost their cubs, must have risen nigh the ship . . . crying and sobbing with their human sort of wail" (MD, 429). Shortly thereafter the crew hears another haunting, homeless cry: "a cry and a rushing--and looking up they saw a falling phantom in the air; and looking down, a little tossed heap of white bubbles in the

blue of the sea" (MD, 429). A sea of death--of the mother, of the infant.

If we are "whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea," as Starbuck says (MD, 148); if the sea is "a foe to man who is an alien to it" (MD, 235); if the sea is "fiend to its own offspring" and will "insult and murder" "baby man" (MD, 235); if "all men live enveloped in whale lines" and "are born with halters around their necks" (MD, 241); if we are "born in throes" and if "'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs" (MD, 360)--then, in the "step-mother world" (MD, 443) of Moby-Dick, death must bear the uncanny mark of infanticide in particular and parricide (the death either of the parents or of their offspring) in
 3
 general.

How, then, to survive the orphaning threat of parricide, where parricide denotes the murder of parent or child? Perhaps by somehow incorporating within life the imminence of such death. Such is the dynamism of the castaway fantasy which would defer the possibility of parricide by deferring to it. Thus, through a certain language of self-splitting, Ahab begets and destroys himself as his own castaway and casting away double, living and yet dead, dead and yet hauntingly alive.

Ishmael attempts to describe Ahab's doubleness in Christian terms. "Ah, God! what trances of torments does that man endure who is consumed with one unachieved revengeful desire. He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms" (MD, 174). He is a living but self-consuming double (for whom "the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish" [MD, 174]) of the dead but resurrected Christ. Ahab's satanic mimesis entails an apocalyptic self-division: the "spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its

base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them . . ." (MD, 174). At once internal and external to him, the chasm⁴ delimits the extremity of Ahab's self-fissuring and self-displacement.

From "this hell" something will "burst" forth in "horror" (MD, 174, 175)--Ahab himself. His parturition will be monstrous:

one supreme purpose . . . by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. (MD, 175)

He is incubus to his own spectral being:

the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing; a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. (MD, 175)

Possessing himself, dispossessing himself, Ahab conceives himself in his own haunted image. "God help thee, old man," Ishmael says, "thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (MD, 175). The vulture becomes a hawk, near the end of the novel, which pecks at Ahab's brain (MD, 495). Here, carrion to his own raptorial self, Ahab is always already dead to himself, a being and the ghost of a being, a "living light" and a "blankness in itself," vulture and carcass: a living parricide. At the end, when the vulture has become the heavenly sky-hawk nailed to the (phallic) mast (MD, 469), as the satanic energies of Ahab manifest themselves in an apocalypse of decreation.

The living parricide, the uncanny self-begetting self-murdering revenant--if such a living-dead person dies again and again in every vulturous attack, he or she also seeks it out, even to the extent of becoming the uncanny agent of self-destruction, as Ahab's suicidal throw of the harpoon at Moby Dick indicates. Ahab is not just a wounded man but the wound and wounding themselves, exile of himself, the casting away castaway who experiences self and world as places of radical, uncanny homelessness.⁵

At the beginning of this chapter I asked what happens in Moby-Dick when the familiar and familial are conjoined to the strange in the idiom of Ishmael's narration. The result seems to be a series of uncanny images of self and world as compromised by a constitutive violence, a violence intrinsic to and yet destructive of self and world. These images are uncanny in the Freudian sense of the term insofar as they mark both a repression and its return. However, these images qualify the oedipal structure of the uncanny by indicating its link to a pre-oedipal violence as well. Thus, these images represent the family as a scene of parricidal violence that is then generalized to the homelessness of the world at large.

It would seem, then, that homelessness befalls the individual as the disaster of selfhood, a disaster that has already happened as the very condition of identity. Homelessness haunts that selfhood which, defined relationally in Moby-Dick, must always encounter in the relations that make it possible what threatens to make it impossible: above all, abandonment and infanticide. In Moby-Dick, relation always threatens nonrelation. Selfhood, in other words, always reflects the threat of the loss of self. Selfhood, then, is not a solution to the

problem of being--to the problem of self-relation or relation to others --it is the problem of being: the uncanny or canny simultaneity of connection and disconnection.

Homelessness marks the limits of being where self as self is at the point of (parricidal) annihilation. Are these limits equally the limits of narration? Is it possible to narrate beyond these limits? How is the problem of the limit condition--a limit condition Ishmael finds everywhere in his life, everywhere in his voyage--inscribed in Ishmael's narration? That is, what is the relation of homelessness to the telling of homelessness? Does the idiom of Ishmael's narration partake of the homelessness, the unhoming violence, he tells of? How does the idiom affect the I that speaks it? If narration can cross the limits of the self, what, then, would become of the narrating I? To what would it refer? What would it be?

Again, in Moby-Dick homelessness marks the limits of life as taking place potentially everywhere within life. In representing these limits through the images of homelessness, does the narration produce a mimesis of them? Is the narrative, in fact, mimetic when it attempts its mimesis of homelessness? Is the narrating voice a mimetic voice? Or is it somehow amimetically inscribed in the novel?

NOTES

1

Subsequent references to the Norton edition of Moby-Dick will appear in parentheses in the text. Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are mine.

2

Seth Benardete has noted the implications of this etymological coincidence in "Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus." In Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Thomas Woodward (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 105-22.

3

The relation between infanticide and the uncanny is inscribed in the German, unheimlich, as the unhomely; it is also inscribed in the English term, "uncanny." According to the O.E.D., "canny wife" is a "wise woman" or midwife and the canny moment the moment of childbirth. To which I would add that the canny moment is also the uncanny moment, the moment of childbirth compromised, either by the death of the child or the death of the mother. "There is a wisdom that is woe," Ishmael says, "but there is a woe that is madness" (355). And there is Ahab who is "madness maddened" (147) in that egregiously compromised and self-compromising figure of the living parricide.

4

The psychic space thus constituted is, in general, the space of incorporation, as Abraham and Torok have explicated this notion (see The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy). It is also the space of an hysterical self-gestation, a self-pregnancy, if you will, or a self-conceiving, in which one is father (or mother) to oneself. Freud has discussed "the wish to be [one's] own father" in terms of the oedipal hypothesis (see "A Special Type of Object-Choice Made by Men"). David Bakan interprets this wish in relation to the fantasy of outliving one's death (see Disease, Pain, and Sacrifice).

5

An entire matrix of images of mutilation, dismemberment, castration, and more generally of reversal, underscores Ahab's uncanny self-transmogrification. These images are too numerous and detailed to analyze here, but I would note that they extend the metaphorical reach of homelessness in this novel.

CHAPTER 4
"AND I ONLY AM ESCAPED ALONE TO TELL THEE":
THE FORT/DA AXIS OF IDENTITY IN MOBY-DICK

The limits of the mimetic self are not the limits of narration. The textual I of Moby-Dick, freed from the mimetic model of character as ego-structure, in fact plays out the possibilities of an amimetic identity, an I in difference.

In his reading of Moby-Dick, Rodolphe Gasche specifies what J. Hillis Miller would call the linguistic turn of this novel in terms of the way the novel's "various codes are unsettled with respect to their referential aspect . . ." (1977, 115).¹ This is the case especially with the narrative code that translates selfhood and maps personal pronouns, for example "I," onto ego. In Moby-Dick, the narrating I can be read as referring to a person, Ishmael, only by excluding certain features of this I and the way it assumes what I shall later explain is the "vacant post," the vacant post of narration. For the I of Moby-Dick resists such identification. To be sure, this I will be read--itself demands to be read as much as it is the object of a reader's similar demand to read it--as the (mimetic) sign that stands for a character, a person, a man with an identity, Ishmael--a man who dreams of an "attainable felicity," a man who finds his vocation as the one who alone survived, survives, to tell of a certain disaster, but in any case a person, the person of the man Ishmael. The I can and will be read in the name of the first² person. But not only or not simply that way, and not that way without

complications about what a narrative I might or might not be. Again, in certain textually key ways which I will analyze, the I of Moby-Dick resists identification in terms of identity, and it does so, of course, by means of the reference which the post of narration puts into question. How so? How does this resistance occur? How can an I, Ishmael, be read otherwise than as the mark of identity?

If the I could be read otherwise, then so too of necessity must the proper name, here given by Ishmael (by the word "Ishmael" but also by the person of Ishmael, to the extent that Ishmael is a person, to himself). "I" and one's proper name, no doubt, typically are taken to substitute for person; such an approach traditionally governs reading. But it need not so. The I and the name can be read otherwise, if for no other reason than to see what happens when they are read in that manner, differently. Thus the question of this chapter: how, in Moby-Dick, do I and Ishmael take on functions other than that of or in addition to characterological nomination? How do the name and the name's pronominal substitute unsettle the system of reference to which Gasche alludes?

I would propose that they take on their unsettling functions with respect to a kind of fort/da movement. The I and the name of Ishmael play out a version of the famous scenario of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle that describes the "game" the grandson plays with his toys and especially his spool.

Here is Freud's description of the game:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. . . . What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" ("there"). This,

then, was the complete game--disappearance and return. (1959, 33)

The game of departure and return takes place as a family scenario: the departure of the mother (and later of the father as well) and her return. In the game, the boy dramatizes his mother's abandonment of him; he stages her departure "to revenge himself on his mother for going away from. In that case [throwing away the object] would have a defiant meaning: 'All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself'" (1959, 35). The desire for revenge supplements the other motive Freud attributes to the child, "an instinct for mastery": "At the outset he was in a passive situation--he was overpowered by the experience [of his mother's departure]; but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part" (1959, 35). The game, then, dramatizes within a scene of family relations the possibility of the loss of relation and a defense against this loss; it dramatizes a certain emotional threat to and subsequent consolidation of identity. It thus stages the general problem of "homelessness" as a loss, a movement fort or "gone"; and it stages its solution as a homecoming, an imagined or fantasized return movement da, back home.

But what returns home in the homecoming of da? According to Samuel Weber, what is sent forth and then retrieved is the identity of the narcissistic ego. When Freud replays in a footnote the following version of the game played by his grandson, he indicates that the game arises as part of the crisis of this ego:

One day the child's mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met with the words "Baby o-o-o-o!" which was a first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not

quite reach to the ground, so that by crouching down
he could make his mirror-image "gone." (1959, 34)

Commenting on this passage, Weber says "what Freud's description . . . suggests is that the subject who articulates the absence of the other--the mother, but also of itself--is one that seeks to remain (itself), in spite of the other" (97). But Freud's description also indicates the impossibility of this wish. The child must redouble the departure (of the mother, of himself) in order to get any return on the psychic investment in the object that threatens to become lost or "gone." Thus, the lost object is lost again in its retrieval through the game. Of course, if it is lost again, it is lost-as-found as well as found-as-lost. The fort/da game sets up an oscillation between loss and gain within each of the terms that disrupt each other. The axis of this oscillation is the limit of identity which the narrating I of Moby-Dick mimes in a miming of the fort/da game. The I of Moby-Dick, Ishmael, does not achieve identity; rather it falls short of and exceeds it. It belongs to both sites of the fort/da at the same time; in being fort and da, it is hence between fort and da" It is, in other words, an I in differance, an animetic identity, whose play is repeatedly to address the scene of its dispatch.

Dispatch, of course, can mean sending. It can refer to the sending of a message as well as to the message itself; or to the speed, the promptness and efficiency, in performing a task or transmitting a message. It can also mean annihilation, killing, a kind of final and irrevocable sending off if you will. These two forms of dispatch frame Moby-Dick: the departure of the Pequod near the beginning of the novel and its apocalyptic destruction at the end. Within Ishmael's narration, the action of sending--of casting off, of transmitting or communicating

and hence narration--necessarily involves the action of separating, and separation in turn repeatedly threatens to become the action of loss, of wandering, of miscommunication, of harm, destruction, and death--of the homelessness I examined in chapter three. Indeed, in Moby-Dick sending repeatedly threatens to foreclose the possibility of sending, just as relating threatens all forms of relating in the novel. But since Ishmael's narration is itself a form of the action of sending (to narrate is to dispatch a story), the threat of sending--the threat to sending, the danger that the communication will not occur or that the message will not arrive or that the narrator will fail; but also sending as threat, as the danger to be avoided--will characterize not just what he narrates but the act of narrating as well. Narrating "itself" will be threatened; the narration will threaten "itself."

Under these circumstances, how can the narrator of Moby-Dick perform the task of narrating, how can the task of narration be performed with dispatch, how can it be dispatched without dispatching itself? And what would happen to an I that attempted such a narrative dispatch, that attempted to relate, tell, communicate, dispatch the news of a disaster, a dispatch, whose only survivor is Ishmael, an "I only" who has "escaped alone to tell," that is, to narrate, to dispatch its story? Wouldn't the resulting narration of disaster be the disaster of narration, the two terms reflecting back on, sustaining, and undermining each other ad infinitum, and wouldn't this infinite double jeopardy divide while leaving intact the I without which Moby-Dick could not be told?

"The disaster ruins everything," Maurice Blanchot has written, "all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; 'I' am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in

this way that I am threatened. . . . There is no reaching the disaster"

(1). Moby-Dick would seem to end, and thus begin, in disaster, with a disaster that spares and threatens the novel's I and that this I tries to reach and in reaching is ruined while being left intact. Let me explain.

Moby-Dick, of course, ends in disaster. "And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight." And yet, "one did survive the wreck" (MD, 470). The epigraph to the epilogue precedes the mention of the one who survives and would seem to specify the survivor as I: "'And I only am escaped alone to tell thee'" (MD, 470). This citation from Job is, however, itself a citation. Four catastrophes beset Job's family and property. After each, a messenger comes to Job with the calamitous news and signs off with the same signature, "I only. . . ." In Moby-Dick, the citation from Job of the citations within Job conflates these I's and thus divides any and every I of Moby-Dick. After the epilogue's epigraph, the I of Moby-Dick cannot not refer to something plural, a group of messengers, for example, or to the citationality of the I. As a consequence, the I cannot not refer to a not-I, to something that is other to and other than the singular identity usually designated by the first person pronoun. In other words, the citational context of the "I only . . ." interrupts the referentiality of this word: it splits and multiplies the reference on the one hand and postpones the appearance of the referent on the other hand. The I of Moby-Dick can no longer simply refer to the person of Ishmael or to Ishmael as person. The I hence-

forth traces the I in its difference and delay, its difference, its dispatch, the disaster of sending and of narration, the dispatching dispatched I in disaster. Which is to say, the I that is both here and there, fort and da, yet neither simply present nor absent, neither fort nor da.

Dispatch, then, names Ishmael's fort/da, the I in difference "escaped alone to tell."

From where does this I narrate? What is the time of its narration? And what does it tell in telling the disaster? Where and when does the disaster occur, if it occurs at all, such that the novel's I escapes to tell it?

In the traditional (mimetic) reading of Moby-Dick, the disaster occurs at the end of the voyage but before the story. The disaster is extratextual. Ishmael, as person, is extratextual. He has an experience and then, in memory, narrates it. His story records what has happened and is in the past. He alone survives the experience and is thus the only one able to relate it.

The epigraph to the epilogue, however, simultaneously reverses this relation of experienced event and its narration. In one of its grammatical possibilities, the citation from Job assimilates experience to narration; it defines experience as the means by which the demand for narration accomplishes itself. Thus, Ishmael does not narrate because he survives, he survives because of the demand of narration. He escapes but is not simply free to recount what has happened; rather he escapes and is also in some sense obliged to tell, bound to the necessity of recounting. In other words, he escapes so that he can perform the witnessing that constitutes his escape and survival: "floating on the

margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me," the I, Ishmael, escapes being sucked under. In full sight of the scene, I/Ishmael watches and records and is already narrating to himself, as if the scene, of which he is a part, were already a text. Without memory, without narration, either the event has not occurred or it has not been survived, which amounts to the same thing. I/Ishmael tells of the disaster in order to survive it, in order to have survived the danger that will not, then, have touched him. Except that, according to the logic of the epigraph,³ I/Ishmael cannot outlive the disaster insofar as he must retell it.

Indeed, the name Ishmael inscribes this necessity, as a certain signature event of the epilogue in conjunction with another signature event of the first chapter will indicate. These two signature events establish and remove the identity of Ishmael, of I, of the two together. In so doing, they relocate the disaster; they move it from its ostensible occurrence at the end of the novel to . . . but here the place and time of the disaster can no longer be specified, since the disaster will have been what makes I/Ishmael and the narration possible, what enables this textual ensemble to take place wherever and whenever it does.

The question of the signature is crucial because the signature, as it has been traditionally read, guarantees what is signed. Substituting for the author, the signature stands guard over the text, something like a surrogate parent, to insure that the text maintains its filiation with its progenitor. Thus, the text will have meant in relation to the intent, for example, conscious or unconscious, of the one who signs and who, in signing, validates, legitimates, or otherwise authenticates the text. The signature, designating an authorial subjectivity, posts that

subjectivity as guard over the text. But can the signature and its signatory control the text?

Derrida says no. As we saw in chapter two, whether the signature is inside or outside the text, the signature fails in its supposed office, traditionally conceived, to guarantee the relation of the text to its author, its sender. Let me recall Derrida's explanation. "First case: the signature belongs to the inside of that . . . which it is presumed to sign. It is in the text, no longer signs, operates as an effect within the object, plays as a piece in what it claims to appropriate or to lead back to its origin" (1986, 4b). In other words, the signature becomes one among the text's many elements and loses its would-be privilege as the guarantor of what the text means. "The filiation is lost." (4b). If the signature belongs to the outside of the text (Derrida's second case), here, too, "the signature emancipates as well the product that dispenses with the signature," since the text, the product, would be complete without it (4b). In the first case, the signature falls into the text, in the second case it falls away from it. We have seen how the textuality of The Scarlet Letter escapes the control of any classically conceived authorial signature. Such a signature would entomb the text, make it a monument of the signature. In fact it is just this signature that is entombed either "within" or "outside" the text whose general signature outstrips the classical signature. In Moby-Dick, I/Ishmael signs on the edges of the narration, at its limits: I/Ishmael narrates and signs the narration within that narration but also at two of its borders, the first line of the first chapter, and the last lines of the epilogue. What happens to the signature here, especially with respect to its possible entombments?

In the epilogue, I/Ishmael signs in relation to nonrelation. This signature occurs when I/Ishmael signs off at the close of the book as "another orphan." I/Ishmael clings to Queequeg's empty coffin. Sealed shut and airtight, it buoys up I/Ishmael and seems to ward off the sharks, whose mouths are similarly locked shut, and the sea-hawks, whose beaks too are kept closed, sheathed: "Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks" (MD, 470). Ishmael survives. The I survives. "On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last" (MD, 470). The pick up saves I/Ishmael from death but also confirms his status as the homeless one. "It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan" (MD, 470). At the moment he is found, I/Ishmael adopts the identity of the orphan who has never been and never will be adopted. At the moment he is found, I/Ishmael adopts an identity that would seem to motivate his selection of the name Ishmael, the Old Testament name of "another orphan." Thus, the signature in the epilogue countersigns the signature of the first line of the novel's first chapter, "Call me Ishmael," which countersigns in turn the "concluding" signature. Ishmael and orphan would counter-sign each other, would seal the novel. The concluding signature would close the book--mark the end of what is narrated--by countersigning the inaugural signature near the opening of the book. At the end, the I becomes the voice at the beginning and would seem to answer its own call in asking to be called Ishmael.

When the I signs as orphan and is taken up by the Rachel, this orphanhood is both reversed (Ishmael ceases to be an orphan insofar as he is found and taken aboard the "family" of the Rachel) and doubled (the Rachel "only found another orphan," which means that he continues to be marked as such by the very act of being retrieved from his orphanhood). When this I signs orphan, it signs and unsigns. It seals and breaks its seal.

This self-signing breaks its seal and thereby unsheathes, unpadlocks the novel by riving the I and exposing its identity to its appetite, so to speak, for nonidentity.⁴ In chapter three, I examined how as orphan Ishmael keeps alive in his name the threat to being that orphanhood signifies throughout the novel. On the one hand, the orphan is orphaned--cut off from the home--by parental violence. This removal is experienced as an orphaning violence by which the person is sent away, exiled, cast off, orphaned, in a word, dispatched; or harmed, killed, made a victim of infanticide, again, dispatched. On the other hand, the orphan is self-orphaned by his (in Moby-Dick the orphans are male) violence against the parents where the parents become the target of a counter-dispatching, again in both senses of the term. I, then, attempts to sign Ishmael, and Ishmael to sign I, to sign it/himself, to seal it/himself in it/himself by countersigning, but I/Ishmael does so in the name of what threatens and what would be protected against. I/Ishmael signs apotropaically as orphan. And as another orphan, as one more orphan, the I, Ishmael, finds protection in the community of those who have been displaced, if not re-moved, from community by their orphan status. But as an other orphan, as a different orphan, he both remains an orphan and yet becomes other to (orphaned from) his orphanhood: the

moment Ishmael is found by the Rachel, he finds his identity and vocation as the homeless one, the narrator; but, too, the moment he is found he enters into a community--the surrogate family, the foster family, of the mother searching for her lost children--and in some sense ceases to be homeless. If Ishmael is threatened in his name by its evocation of orphanhood, he is threatened in his orphanhood by the life-saving that cuts across this identity as orphan. His signature, perforce, breaks or is broken in its seal.

I would add, parenthetically, that just as Ishmael attempts to sign and countersign himself within the seal of a self-enclosed, self-sustaining identity, so too does Ahab try to beget himself. This effort fractures the self; it ends up producing the self as an abyss folded over on itself: the I that would beget itself produces itself as both before and after itself and breaks its seal in the impossible movement of self-signing. Thus, Ahab would seem to produce and destroy himself simultaneously. Ishmael explains: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (MD, 175). Here, Ahab is divided within himself; but the internal division also begins to undergo a reversal in the image of the interior creature feeding upon Ahab's heart in an incorporative act that would turn Ahab inside out, that would put the creator inside the created creature. The incorporation would in this way undo the creation; but it would thereby also double, mime, simulate, or repeat it since "Prometheus" and the vulture are both Ahab. Thus, Ahab creates Ahab; Ahab decreates Ahab. Ahab out of Ahab; Ahab into Ahab. Fort/da. This, then, will have been Ahab's impossible self-

designation, the self-designing that would seal his identity: "what breaks in me?" he asks as he chases the whale on the third day. "'Some sinew cracks!--'tis whole again . . .'" (MD, 466). The dash here intervenes in what could be called Ahab's fort--da signature, and it intervenes to separate and unite grammatically what is separated and united semantically: not just "some sinew cracks" and then "is made whole again," but also "some sinew cracks" and in the cracking "tis whole again." The dash remains undecided on this point. What happens to Ahab's sinew happens to his signature, and doesn't just happen to the signature but is the structure and force of any signature.

The breaking of the signature's attempted seal of identity occurs in Ishmael's name and its calling.

The first line of the first chapter of the novel bespeaks a signature. "Call me Ishmael," the I says, perhaps in address to a you that in any case remains unnamed (MD, 12). The I of the novel announces a name and a vocation: the voice you hear in reading is the voice of Ishmael who is now narrating. Ishmael's signature here incorporates identity and narration into each other.

This moment of signing, however, divides Ishmael's identity as it establishes it. And the signature does so in two different ways according to whether Ishmael is the name one is to call the me that designates the I of the novel or Ishmael is the one addressed by the me that asks to be called out to by Ishmael.

As an address to an indefinite you, the opening line of the novel's first chapter names Ishmael as the name to be given to the grammatical object, me, not (or at least only indirectly to) the subject, I. The me will have been given in the calling of it by name, by a name; that is,

in the naming of it. Only then will an I am appear. The name Ishmael, then, appears in the context of a me objectified by its relation to an unnamed, unobjectified you. The signature here displaces the Cartesian certitude that will later in the novel become the focus for a reflection on the peril inherent to the I am. In the meantime, the novel's I has been delayed and split at the outset. The I is deflected into the object me that is deflected into the name of Ishmael; the I is thus delayed in the me as well as in the name. It has been delayed until the name and the me have been invoked to name the object of address, the me that both is and is not quite the I that one would assume has invoked itself. In other words, one cannot quite say that Ishmael names Ishmael since in some sense the I is held suspended until the me has been decided by being named; it is also held suspended in the me as well, and to that suspension is added the other suspension of the name. Again, this me as grammatical object and as the object of an unspecified addressee--the you that is not named as such, the other--this me both refers to and suspends the subjectivity of a would-be I which henceforth appears only later.

It does so again when the opening line is read as an address to Ishmael: Call to me, Ishmael, address me, speak to me. If this possibility is read along with its other meaning as an address to the reader, the two possibilities begom to effect an exchange or confusion of identities:

Ishmael, call to me; Ishmael, call me Ishmael. You,
Ishmael, you readers who are Ishmael, call to me.
As I call to you. As I ask you to call me by the
name of Ishmael.

Here, the two possibilities begin to exceed the limit of identity--a limit that would guarantee the difference between, and hence the iden-

tity of the, identities--that the name is traditionally invoked to secure. We call out by name to assure proper identification. In Moby-Dick, however, the calling by name also withdraws the assurance of identity. In other words, the signature of Ishmael plays fort/da with I/me. Or, rather, it places the identity of the speaking subject both here and there, yet neither here nor there.

In a second and more general way, Ishmael marks a division in the I that appears as me in its first self-announcement, for the name Ishmael functions as does any sign: it is arbitrary, it bears no intrinsic relation to what it names. Ishmael seems to be recalling this feature of language in his "call": if you need a name for me, for the me of the novel, for the narrating voice, the I, then let's settle on Ishmael. We can make use of the convenience of a name. Let's choose Ishmael; Ishmael will be the name of convenience, the means by which I will come and go. Of course, another name would do, for to be able to be called this particular name is to be nameable; it is to be able to receive any name or mark in its arbitrariness. Here the proper name inscribes its impropriety, for in its arbitrariness it is not proper to Ishmael. As an identity event, Ishmael inscribes the possibility of nonidentity for the same reason: the name in its arbitrariness withdraws the identity of the one who is named in the presentation of the (non)identifying name. The analysis of the sign will always remind us of the name's arbitrariness.

Ishmael tries to countersign this arbitrariness--he tries to remove his name--by signing off as "another orphan," a name that no longer designates a unique individual but a textual condition, a generic rather than a unique textual fate. And a fate that overtakes Ishmael by

chance, that is, arbitrarily. "It so chanced," Ishmael says, "that . . . I was he whom the Fates ordained" to be on the outer edges of the vortex that engulfs the Pequod and that subsides before it can engulf him. Ishmael survives by chance, as the arbitrary object, the "he whom" the Fates ordain to survive, and as the one more other orphan the Rachel finds. With what consequences?

At the end of the novel, Ishmael's subjectivity recedes precisely at the moment the novel's I survives: the I is replaced by the third person, he; and then this he is further objectified and abstracted as it becomes another orphan. What is found by the Rachel is a deferred and differentiated I, an I in its orphanhood, the orphanhood of the I--the I as orphan but also the orphan as I, the condition of the I. The latter no longer is the person of Ishmael or Ishmael as person but the orphanhood of Ishmael and Ishmael as orphan. In other words, the orphanhood of the name and the name as orphan.

The countersigned fort/da signature--Ishmael/another orphan--substitutes proper name and common noun. This substitution then begins to rework the process of reference such that the naming refers to another naming. It is not that the name imprisons one in language, however, but that name and named are shown to have always already been textualized. That, of course, is Ahab's fear--that we are "imprisoned" in appearances. Ahab's raging desire is to strike through these "pasteboard masks": "'If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall'" (MD, 144). But this "outside" is always already textualized. The function of I/Ishmael in Moby-Dick is to indicate just this situation, that name and named always partake of a generalized textuality. In the previous

chapter we saw how both Ishmael and Ahab attempt to restore the home and the purity of the self's familial origin, and how their attempts inevitably reinscribe the home as a place of homelessness and radical jeopardy to self. But the outside of life--death as the extremest form of homelessness, yet the other forms of homelessness as well--its beyond, the otherness that is not self, these are always already inscribed in the self as what makes self non-self-identical in its identity. Thus, no matter how much Ishmael attempts to recuperate a being behind or beyond the name, to recover an identity outside of language, Ishmael/ orphan--as person and as name--cannot exist except within a textual scheme, here marked by the collapsing or expansion of proper name and common noun into each other. Each dispatches the other and so indicates the larger problem of identity, the problem of homelessness, as a problem within textuality. The textual complexities of I/Ishmael do not derive from the psychological complexities of a mimetically conceived character, just the reverse. The fort/da of identity participates in a textual field that no self, no identity, no person can escape or dominate.

Where does the homeless I of Ishmael come from? I/Ishmael never
 5
 says. It is almost as if I/Ishmael looms into sight out of nowhere in a chapter, "Loomings" (whose name, too, by the way, comes from an unknown origin). Once again, Ishmael comes into sight not as a settled identity but as a possible name, a linguistic shape if you will. And so too the I at the end of the novel, which appears under the aegis of the singular/plural I of Job as an I in citation. Here/there, I cites I, which countersigns Ishmael. The juxtaposition of the signature at the novel's end with the one near the beginning folds the appearing or looming of

Ishmael and the appearing or looming of the I in survival into each other. The nowhere from which I/Ishmael comes is the nowhere of the orphan whose place is also the nonplace of the I that, in being a citation, is divided from itself and cut off from its arrival to itself.

One can mark this circumstance of the I in terms of the fort/da of the call. The name of Ishmael is given in the call. But what is this call? Like the name and the I, it too would seem to call out or be called out from nowhere. Its time would also seem to be a nontime, that of narration. Calling and narrating would seem to coincide. But, again, what is the call, and who or what calls, who or what is called?

The call can take on many different characters: that of a petition, a request, an invocation, an insistence, a command, an avowal, a plea, and perhaps others as well. Thus, the tone is undecided: call me Ishmael, you may call me Ishmael, you must call me by that name, the name is Ishmael, please, and so on.

Who calls? Perhaps Ishmael, though Ishmael may be a subterfuge for an escapee, a fugitive. This fugitive I or me both takes its name of Ishmael and gives itself this name in the command/request to be called Ishmael. The I calls you, an unnamed other, to call it. The I also calls itself as it asks or demands to be called, and as it asks or demands to be called Ishmael. Thus the I simultaneously sends out and receives the call. It performs itself.

The I, of course, may not be only the sender, or even the only sender, of the call; the I might be, rather or in addition, one of its receivers. The call is called--sent out, addressed, dispatched--without specifying any receiver, any second person, for example, or even any addressee at all. The addressee remains in question, suspended, pos-

sibly absent in fact; but it is absent in principle. Since the I or me must be counted among the possible addressees (if the call is sent, it may be addressed back to the sender as well as from the sender), the sender too remains suspended and in principle always already absent. The call remains separated from any empirically determined sender or receiver.

Derrida's discussion of the necessary absence of the addressee may help clarify this situation of the call. "A written sign is proffered in the absence of the addressee," and this absence "must be capable of being brought to a certain absolute degree of absence for the structure of writing . . . to be constituted" (1982, 315). Since the sign must be iterable, repeatable, legible for any possible user, its repeatability in consequence severs it from any particular user and hence from all possible users. "My 'written communication' must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible." In other words, "it must be repeatable--iterable--in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determined set of addressees. This iterability . . . structures the mark of writing itself . . ." (1982, 315). Since the sign can function in the absence of this or that receiver, it must be because its ability to function in the absence of any and all receivers is part of its structure. Again, "all writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, 'death,' or the possibility of the 'death' of

the addressee inscribed in the structure of the mark . . ." (1977, 315-16).

A similar argument underscores the necessary possibility of the "death" of the sender. The iterability of the mark separates the mark from its sender and enables Derrida to specify writing as an "essential drifting," as "orphaned," and as "separated at birth from the assistance of its father" (316). Ishmael/orphan names and performs this drifting.

In Speech and Phenomena, Derrida describes the drifting or orphaning in terms of a movement of exile and death. His argument takes into account a difficulty in Husserl's notion of meaning as soliloquy concerning the nature and function of what Husserl calls "indication" in contrast to "expression." Husserl would like to distinguish between the two, but as Derrida shows, in terms of Husserl's argument "every expression would thus be caught up, despite itself, in an indicative process" (21). This process is the process of death. According to Derrida, for Husserl

All speech, or rather everything in speech which does not restore the immediate presence of the signified content, is inexpressive. Pure expression will be the pure active intention (spirit, Psyche, life, will) of an act of meaning (bedeuten) that animates a speech whose content (Bedeutung) is present. It is present not in nature, since only indication takes place in nature and across space, but in consciousness. Thus it is present to an "inner" intuition or perception. . . . The meaning is therefore present to the self in the life of a present that has not yet gone forth from itself into the world, space, or nature. All these "goings-forth" effectively exile this life of self-presence in indication. We know now that indication, which thus far includes practically the whole surface of language, is the process of death at work in signs. (1973, 40)

The sendings or goings-forth of a meaning interrupt the self-presence of meaning in intuition. The dispatch that sends also kills off; or,

rather, it shows death as already inhabiting the life of self-presence. In Moby-Dick, I/Ishmael performs this process of death at work in signs; it makes it explicit.

Later, Derrida extends his analysis of this dispatching process to the first person singular pronoun and determines the "I am mortal" in relation to the "I am" vis-a-vis the ideality of a presence that is: "To think of presence as the universal form of transcendental life is to open myself to the knowledge that in my absence, beyond my empirical existence, before my birth and after my death, the present is. . . . The relation with my death (with disappearance in general) thus lurks in the determination of being as presence, ideality, the absolute possibility of repetition. The possibility of the sign is this relationship with death" (1973, 54). As a consequence, "the appearing of the I to itself in the I am is thus originally a relation with its own possible disappearance" (1973, 54). As a further consequence, "my death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the I" (1973, 96). If the I depended on the life of a speaking subject, the I could not function were this subject to be absent, dead, fictitious, or in any other way not alive. The I in such exile--orphaned, absent, dead, fictionalized--is "the ordinary story of language" (1973, 97). And it is the story of the I of Moby-Dick, an I that repeatedly marks its "death," most notably in the images of the mast and the vertical coffin, icons of the I.

In chapter 35, "The Mast-Head," I/Ishmael reflects on the question of identity while atop the masthead, the mast itself forming a gigantic I, a capital I as it were. This I, however, somehow encourages the loss of identity; in any case it is a dangerous column offering a dangerous

perspective. Ishmael imagines what can happen to a sailor who assumes this lookout post:

lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity. . . . In this enchanted mood, the spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space. . . . (MD, 140)

The mast, icon of the I, here becomes the site not of identity but identity dispersed, diffused, sent out, lost--dispatched.

The dispatching dispatched I plays out its fort/da atop the mast. The first movement of reflection sends identity away, assuming that it was present to begin with. Can this identity be retrieved? The movement of or toward retrieval coincides, for I/Ishmael, with self-reflection and occurs when the subject turns back on itself in order to grasp itself in its self-identity.

But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day . . . with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. (MD, 140)

Identity comes back in horror as the self-conscious subject realizes it is about to die. Here, the return of consciousness, of identity, of the consciousness of identity and the identity of consciousness, occurs as part and parcel of its absolute dispatch, so that the horror the subject experiences is the horror of anticipating the death that is already happening, that is already in process. In short, the I is already dead at the moment it comes to itself and is able to receive from itself the consciousness that thereby condemns it to living out its death. Thus,

Ishmael erects the I in its anti-erection. One could say, pace Der-rida's Glas, that the I falls to the tomb.

This image of entombment rewrites the Cartesian cogito, and does so by rewriting Descartes' theory of vortices. In Principles of Philosophy Descartes supposes that the matter of the universe forms "a fluid body, such as I judge the heaven to be" (106). Within this fluid, Descartes imagines that "the matter of the heaven . . . unceasingly revolves, like a vortex having the Sun at its center . . ." (96). In a vortical undoing of Descartes, I/Ishmael brings the cosmological principle of the vortex into the scene of self-reflection as the unground of the sub-⁷ject's annihilation, as the cogito's entombment.

For Descartes, of course, self-reflection guarantees identity: je pense, donc je suis, cogito ergo sum, I am thinking, therefore I exist. Such an identity of consciousness with itself would erect the I out of itself, and this is the case even at the limits of thought, when thought finds itself in doubt about itself, since doubting for Descartes is an instance of thinking. The iconography of the I in Ishmael's reflection inscribes the apodictic solidity of thinking and being, the two poles so to speak, of the Cartesian self-identity. Ishmael, however, introduces a third point of reference in this geometry of selfhood, and the resulting triangulation opens up identity to the catastrophe of the vortex that will have swallowed up the Pequod leaving . . . I only escaped alone to tell. The vortex, then--the very movement of the Cartesian universe, the principle of its being--becomes the figure in Moby-Dick of what dispatches identity. Thus, again, the I falls to its tomb.

The I falls to its tomb, but the tomb resurrects the I. The tomb of the I--the tomb that entombs the I but also the I as tomb: Queequeg's

empty coffin. This coffin shoots lengthwise (not horizontally but vertically, an I in erection) up out of the novel's final vortex, the I having gained its "vital center."

So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. (MD, 470)

The "closing vortex" delivers the axial I--Queequeg's vertical coffin,
 8
 another iconographic variation of the capital I, and I/Ishmael. Thus, "one did survive the wreck," that "one" being the I which henceforth does not live but rather lives on, survives in the double sense of outliving and living off of. I/Ishmael outlives the crew and lives off of the artifact of the empty tomb which delivers I/Ishmael from the disaster of identity--the disaster that happens to identity and the disaster that constitutes identity.

This tomb doubles (for) the post of narration that can only be assumed by an I delivered of itself to the task of telling. Like the mast, the tomb, and the I, the post of narration inscribes a certain
 9
 "nothing," a certain "vacancy," according to a double law of chance and necessity: "It so chanced, that after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman, when that bowsman assumed the vacant post" (MD, 470; my emphasis). The vacant post, the place and chance of substitution: bowsman for Parsee, Ishmael for bowsman; and then orphan for Ishmael, the I in citation from

Job for orphan, and hence I for I. After assuming the post vacated by the Parsee, the I who was he--he can refer to either I/Ishmael or Ishmael/Parsee or both--is tossed overboard, only to assume yet another vacant post, this time the empty coffin in its erection of the absent dead. On this empty, vacant I, yet another I survives, fated and chancing to escape, fated and chancing to tell. This I assumes itself, assumes the function of the I as the vacant post from which the demand for narration dispatches its strange call in the strange fort/da movement of the strange, disseminating, amimetic word, I, that de-limits identity and being in its "Call me Ishmael."

NOTES

1

Gasche's article, "The Scene of Writing: a Deferred Outset," remains the most sophisticated of the attempted Derridean readings of Moby-Dick. Chapter 32, "Cetology," Gasche argues, presents "the scene and the necessity of writing" (1977, 151) as a deferral of the novel's "outset." As an inscription within the text of what will have been necessary for the novel, which is well under way, to have begun, the scene of writing is an abyss, much as The Scarlet Letter's moral is: the scene that describes the text's production as writing occurs within the writing as a moment of what it describes. Such scenes of writing mimic the primal scene, archetype of the classical signature that attempts to sign its advent.

Thomas F. Berninghausen, in "Writing on the Body: The Figure of Authority in Moby-Dick," has explored a number of the novel's tropes, especially in relation to the problem of authority and its duplicitous written inscription, to the problem of reading, and to the image of the sun. The novel's tropes repeatedly converge in a way that produces various textual abysses, particularly when the issue is one of authority or writing.

Michael Vannoy Adams, in "Whaling and Difference: Moby-Dick Deconstructed," reads the novel in terms of its indeterminacy of meaning and a number of different deconstructive "motifs": problems with the classical sign, the inscription of writing in writing, the relation of the sign to death, and dissemination.

2

The sheer number of classical readings of the novel indicate how easily the I of Moby-Dick fulfills the common expectation of readers that it is to be read as the mark of identity, self, ego, person.

3

The strange logic of the disaster--"the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact"; "there is no reaching the disaster" (Blanchot, 1)--affects Ahab as well. Ahab responds to the white whale as if it were the disaster that has ruined everything. Is there a sense in which Moby Dick has left Ahab intact despite having taken his leg? Perhaps, in that only having taken Ahab's leg, Moby Dick has not been the disaster. "The infiniteness of the threat" (Blanchot, 1) does not take place in the loss of the leg. As long as he lives, Ahab is on this side of the disaster, unmarked by it even when he is marked by it.

4

Since the I in question is not an ego-structure, this appetite is not to be understood in terms of ego states but as a textual appetite, an animetic appetite, if you will. The mimetic reading would trace the appetite back to a form of psychological desire.

5

At the beginning of the first chapter, Ishmael appears in relation to a "conceit": going to sea as a form of cure. At the end of "loomings," he specifies his reasons for going to sea as just so many "wild conceits." In other words, in one reading of the word "conceit," Ishmael inscribes himself in his text as a figure of speech.

6

According to Max Weber, "Labor must . . . be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling. But such an attitude is by no means a product of nature. It cannot be evoked by low wages or high ones alone, but can only be the product of a long and arduous process of education" (62; my emphasis). Calling, as apprenticeship, would be the accession of the individual into work. This motif would need to be elaborated with respect to the numerous references in Moby-Dick to labor and economy, especially to the textual economy of looming or weaving.

7

A series of images connects the vortex to the sounding and breaching of the whale, the action of the whale's fin, and thus, in Gasche's analysis, to the inscribed scene of writing in the novel. The vortex, of course, folds its medium; the vortex allows for a plunge that is nevertheless not an entrance into its medium. The vortex parts its medium, or rather is the medium's parting of itself. In any case, the vortex constitutes an inverse image of the I and may designate another aspect of the text's appetite, its ability to engulf those who would erect the I in its purported identity over the vortex.

8

One could trace out this motif with respect to all the phallic imagery of the text, including Ahab's leg, the harpoons and lances, the nail, the needle, and the waif, for example.

9

Recall the description of Ahab: "the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself" (MD, 175; my emphasis). Ahab attempts to make a purchase on this vacancy, to fill it with an image of himself. But this abysmal project only splits him into the condition of the living parricide, as we saw in the previous chapter.

CONCLUSION

The United States could be said to come into being through a signature event. "We, the people . . . ," the Preamble declares. Who speaks here? Who is this "we"?

Only a few individuals signed the document in the first sense of the signature as the designation of the one who signs. Perhaps fewer still signed the document in the sense of stamping it with their particular stylistic signatures.

Neither of these signatures is sufficient to account for the "we" of "the people," "the people of the United States." The "we" cannot refer, in the ordinary sense of the term, to the supposed referent posited in its naming. For "the people" as such do not exist, the United States does not exist, prior to the execution of the document. That is, the document performs what it proclaims, it causes to happen what it claims has already happened, that "we, the people" contract a unity among themselves.

The fictional nature of this unity is inscribed in the supplementary plurality the "we" assigns to itself through the words "we," "people," and "states": "we, the people of the United States." The declaration of unity affirms itself in its own name, the name it attempts to establish but must presume in order to do so.

What is the reference, then, but the inauguration of a declared reality in its performative inscription?

As Derrida has remarked, however, "not all performatives, a theoretician of speech acts would say, are 'happy.' That depends on a great number of conditions and conventions that form the context of such events" (1987, 18).

The performative that constitutes Poirier's announcement of the origins of American literature is a case in point. In my introduction, I cited the following passage from A World Elsewhere:

Let us for the moment assume with Hegel that "freedom" is a creation not of political institutions but of consciousness, that freedom is that reality which consciousness creates for itself. The assumption makes it more understandable that the creation of America out of a continental vastness is to some degree synonymous in the imagination with the creation of freedom, of an open space made free, once savagery has been dislodged, for some unexampled expansion of human consciousness. (4)

In this passage, I said, Poirier produces an image of America coincident with a spectacle of consciousness begetting itself.

Except that something intervenes, something interrupts this spectacle and prevents consciousness from closing upon itself and achieving its self-origin: a repressed violence that must precede the adventure of consciousness itself, that clears the way for consciousness. Poirier represses this violence, which henceforth returns as the necessity of a certain movement of "dislodging" an indigenous continental savagery: "Once savagery has been dislodged." The dislodging is not itself the work of consciousness so much as it is what makes "some unexampled expansion of human consciousness" possible.

"Once" can mean after. After savagery has been removed, then the proper work of consciousness begins--the creation of freedom, of an open space made free for consciousness's enlargement. Savagery would thus be a species of unfreedom, perhaps a quasi-Hegelian fall of spirit into

matter or Nature, though Poirier envisions nothing dialectical about the dislodging movement out of the vast continent into the "open space made free" not for a particular kind of consciousness but consciousness itself, "human consciousness."

If "savagery" were read in relation to the American Indian, however, then Poirier's rhetoric would in fact participate in the repressed violence of "the creation of America," a creation synonymous in the caucasian's ethnocentric imagination with the creation of his freedom once the indigenous savages have been removed. The "open space" will have been "made free" in the name of the supposedly universal categories that have held sway throughout the metaphysical era of the West: "the imagination" as a singular, unitary, universal possession of humans everywhere; and freedom and consciousness as similar attributes of the human. Here Poirier "dislodges" the inaugural violence that creates the synonymy of America and the creation of freedom, which means America and the would-be self-begetting motions of consciousness itself.

The concept of synonymy functions in Poirier's passage to efface its signifying operation in the face of what it signifies for him (recall that this is Derrida's description of the classical or transcendent reading): the identity of imagination with itself, consciousness with itself, America with itself, and each of these with the others as a self-same unity and telos of human consciousness. Poirier's rhetorical anthem to the nation of America creates an image of the creation of America that is rhetorically synonymous with what he argues is the synonymous relation between America and freedom. Thus, some unexamined expansion of human consciousness becomes the exemplary seal, the exemplary self-sealing, of Poirier's own imperialist gesture.

Derrida has made explicit the link between ethnocentrism and the philosophical tradition. Ethnocentrism, Derrida writes in Of Grammatology, has "everywhere and always . . . controlled the concept of writing" (3). Indeed, logocentrism, "the metaphysics of phonetic writing," has been "nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism" (3). This demonstration, of course, takes Derrida through his now famous critique of "the meaning of being in general as presence" (12) and its relation to voice, "the system of 'hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak' through the phonic substance . . ." (7).

Poirier, we have just seen, repeats the ethnocentric violence that historically accompanied the "creation" of America through the European "dislodging" of the country's native "savagery," and that continues in the name "America" itself. That name, for Poirier, stands for the project of self-creation whose architectonic image he finds in metaphors of building throughout American literature (xix). The American novelist has attempted to build a world elsewhere: "The most interesting American books are an image of the creation of America itself, of the effort, in the words of Emerson's Orphic poet, to 'Build therefore your own world'" (3). The edifice that interests Poirier is a mental and a linguistic one. "In Emerson and his successors, including Stevens, 'building' refers less to structures in the world, however, than to structures of the mind and to analogous structures of language" (xix). Again, Poirier presumes the universality of the categories he invokes.

Furthermore, what intrigues Poirier in this project of consciousness-as-America constructing America-as-consciousness (and vice versa) is style. Style is the key. But what is style if not the more fundamental project that, Derrida has shown, determines techne in terms of

presence? "As it is used in this book," Poirier writes, "the word style refers to grammar, syntax, and tropes only by way of defining some more significant aspects of style: the sounds, identities, and presences shaped by these technical aspects of expression" (xx). There it is, in one swift compaction, the history of the metaphysical project in miniature. The sounds, identities, and presences behind the techniques, the techne, of writing. The technical aspects of expression--of writing in the classical sense--efface themselves in the face of the signified: the logocentric constellation of sounds, identities, and presences. Here, then, in "the effort to create a world in which consciousness might be free to explore its powers and affinities" (xxi), America merges with the Logos itself. Such is the transcendent reading that Poirier has reproduced in producing his ethnocentric history of American literature moving "toward some further created being and some other world" (252).

For American studies, the challenge of Derrida's deconstruction would be to read American literature otherwise.

It is with an eye to this otherwise that I have sought to explore the ways The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick write the amimesis of truth and the I, particularly with respect to the power of the general textual signature to expose and disrupt the referential claims, along with their ethnocentric aggrandizements of a certain form of consciousness and thus of a certain form of reading and writing, of the classical signature.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

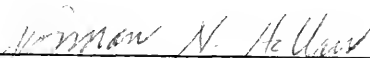
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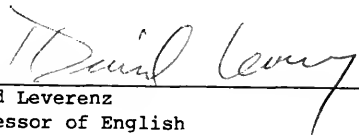
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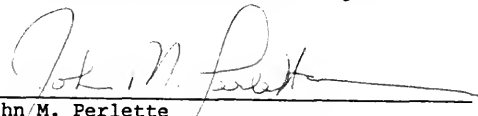
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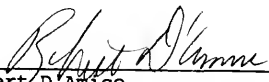
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This thesis was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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